Where the Lonely Ones Go

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by CSHfic, VSfic

Summary

"When did you arrive?" Lan Zhan asks, but he's looking at the child in Wei Wuxian's arms, and the question is clearly, *whose baby is this*, and maybe, *should I be concerned?*

or

Accidental (haunted) baby acquisition

Notes

Please enjoy this very self indulgent fic, if baby acquisition is your thing :)

Chapter 1

Wei Wuxian weaves his way through the afternoon market stalls, pausing every so often to poke at or admire or puzzle over some item or another. There's a whole row of stalls selling hand painted scrolls and books of poetry and prose, delicately bound so that their covers are as much art as their contents. He buys a stick of candied hawthorn, and then becomes so engrossed in solving the puzzle box perched on the corner of another table offering colorful toys and kites that he forgets to eat it.

All the while, as he weaves in and out of the merry crowds of shoppers, he keeps one eye trained for any flash of stark white robes against the bustling streets. By the time he has made nearly two full passes of the market, he has to admit to himself that he must be the first to arrive.

He's not entirely surprised, because although Jurong City is slightly closer to Gusu than Yunmeng, he did get a bit of a head start, and has the advantage of traveling alone without a group of juniors to shepherd. Lan Zhan's letter is tucked safely in his pocket, and although it had been barely a week since he'd left for Yunmeng to visit Lotus Pier, he'd been as happy to see Lan Zhan's beautiful calligraphy as he'd been when receiving his sparse letters during his year of traveling before their marriage.

Jiang Cheng had scoffed and huffed over this when he'd seen his face, even more so when Wei Wuxian finished reading the letter right in the middle of the dinner it was delivered during. It was only a simple message to inform him that a request had been sent to Cloud Recesses from Jurong City for assistance with a possible haunting, and that Lan Zhan intended to take a group of the younger juniors there himself. The village had once been under the purview of the Moling Su sect, and from Lan Zhan's delicate phrasing, Wei Wuxian had guessed that there was some mismanagement even before their sect leader was outed as a rotten bastard.

The letter was entirely proper, with the only piece of sentiment being the small "Yours, always" at the end that was reserved only for him. Still, Wei Wuxian had been able to read between the lines, so he grinned not over the words, but over the message that hadn't been written: Lan Zhan planned to leave soon, and would not be there to greet Wei Wuxian when he returned to Cloud Recesses himself, and thoughtful as always, he hadn't wanted Wei Wuxian to worry, for even a moment, where he had gone.

"You're leaving early, then?" Jiang Cheng had asked, after he'd swatted at Wei Wuxian for ignoring him, and then pried the letter out of his hands to read for himself.

"Ah, Jiang Cheng, don't be jealous! You know I treasure every moment with you," Wei Wuxian said, but the idea was already settling in his mind. Jurong City wasn't very far out of the way of his return from Lotus Pier, after all.

“It’s been too long since Lan Zhan and I have been on a night hunt together,” he’d said wistfully. Jiang Cheng didn’t point out that the two of *them* had only just gone on a night hunt yesterday.

If Wei Wuxian was being honest with himself, even one week was getting to be too long to be away from his husband, but he knew saying as much to Jiang Cheng would only prompt more griping about their clinginess.

Jiang Cheng had only rolled his eyes, saying, “I don’t know why they didn’t ask us. We’re just as close as Gusu.” They were, but only barely. Wei Wuxian still laughed.

“Even terrorized by ghosts, people will go out of their way to avoid your grumpy—“

“Shut up, Wei Wuxian,” Jiang Cheng had snapped, smacking his arm hard enough to splash wine over both of them. “Or should I throw you out tonight? Maybe next time you’re here, you’ll have learned some manners.”

Next time. Wei Wuxian had grinned, and Jiang Chang had squinted at him like he’d just bitten into a particularly sour fruit, but he didn’t take the offer back. Wei Wuxian had smiled and finished his wine, satisfied that Jiang Cheng wasn’t truly offended by him leaving early—he would stay, if he thought for a second he was. They’d let the conversation flow to other things, and Jiang Cheng had sniped at him a bit as he’d packed his things, and then he’d gone, claiming he was too busy with other things to see Wei Wuxian off in the morning.

Wei Wuxian is fairly certain that Lan Zhan hadn’t included where they were going as an invitation for him to come along, but really, if he’s surprised to see him when he does finally get here, he’ll have no one to blame but himself.

Wei Wuxian pauses in the street as the faintest brush of… something… draws his attention down one of the rows of stalls. He frowns, ignoring the grumbles of the people forced to flow around him as he cuts slowly across the street, searching. It had only been for a moment, the sensation not unlike the uneasy prickle of being watched, but whatever it had been, he can’t quite pinpoint the source—

A loud crash snaps his focus as a chorus of startled yelps erupt further up the road. The crowd ahead of him scatters backwards from the collapsed remains of a stall that was once selling steamed buns, which he unfortunately learns after one squishes under his boot before he can step around it. He cringes, but the owner of the stall is too busy swearing over the splintered leg of the stall to notice him stomping on his product, so he scrapes it off on the ground hastily.

By this point on his walk, the market stalls have thinned into only the occasional vendor selling mostly hot food and fresh produce, and the surrounding buildings have given over from businesses and inns to alleyways and the city’s larger houses. Wei Wuxian doesn’t mind

the gawking onlookers blocking the road. He's satisfied, now that he's reached the very end of the marketplace, that he has truly arrived too early to surprise Lan Zhan.

It's a shame Lan Zhan hadn't included the name of the person who had requested their help in his letter. Wei Wuxian had somewhat naively thought he would be able to simply ask the locals until he'd found them, but he hadn't realized that Jurong City was so large. It almost reminds him of Caiyi town, between the markets and the river that ran directly through its center.

He'd crossed a beautiful bridge on his walk here, and paused to stare down at the crystal clear water, missing Lotus Pier already. Maybe next time, he could convince Jiang Cheng to invite Lan Zhan to visit as well. Lan Zhan is still teaching and carrying some duties that ostensibly should belong to the sect leader, but between resigning from the role of Chief Cultivator and his brother transitioning out of seclusion, Lan Zhan finally has a small amount of free time again, and Wei Wuxian was determined to occupy as much of it himself as he possibly could.

Wei Wuxian stares back the way he'd come. He'd passed a number of inns on the way here, and although he doesn't want to reserve a room just yet in case Lan Zhan arrives before nightfall, it's close enough to dinner time that he could stop to eat and drink some of the wait away.

He's resigned himself to do just that when the muttering behind him redoubles into something much more pointed, and something slams into his legs from behind, nearly sending them both sprawling. He puts an arm out on instinct and just barely manages to snag the sleeve of an absolutely filthy girl before she manages to face plant into the dirt.

Wei Wuxian nearly laughs at the indignant scowl she shoots at him, but before he can tease her over giving him such an ungrateful look, the man from the steamed bun stall stomps over and grabs her other arm. His face is an unflattering shade purple that Wei Wuxian recognizes well from his own ill-spent youth, but he's still startled by the malice in his expression.

"Didn't I tell you to *stay away*—" He's screaming so loud that heads have started to swivel, but when he raises a fist, that's enough. Wei Wuxian snatches his arm before he can do anything and jerks it aside so roughly the man winces.

The man meets Wei Wuxian's gaze, like he isn't a coward about to hit a little girl, and actually has the audacity to glare at him like *he's* done something wrong. Anger boils in his chest so quickly he has to look away to get a hold of himself. Wei Wuxian glances back at the crowd and freezes.

He'd been expecting to see, maybe not support, but at least something of his own outrage at the man's actions reflected there. The memory of a crowd of strangers in Yiling, chiding a new father for failing to properly comfort his son, flashes briefly through his mind. Surely they could spare even half that contempt on behalf of this girl. Instead, the crowd stares with open distaste, not at the man, but at Wei Wuxian.

He meets their gazes, and their eyes quickly skitter away. Wei Wuxian may not carry a sword anymore, but even if they don't recognize Chenqing on his belt, they can recognize a cultivator in the way he carries himself. The man jerks his arm back, and Wei Wuxian lets

him go, but he doesn't let go of the girl, only uses the hand on her arm to nudge her gently behind him.

"What's going on, here?" Wei Wuxian asks.

"Young master, don't interfere. You don't know..." A woman behind the merchant begins, and then trails off apprehensively. Wei Wuxian flicks his eyes over to her, but that is apparently all she has to say.

"That brat destroyed my stall," the man says. "I've told her before to stay away, and now my stall is ruined, and an entire day's worth of wages is on the ground!"

"I didn't!" the little girl shouts, and while Wei Wuxian winces internally at her lack of manners, he knows better than to chide her for them now. He knows very well how that sort of criticism is taken by precocious little children, and with the state of her robes and hair, Wei Wuxian can guess very well for himself why she hasn't been taught any manners.

The man keeps shouting at Wei Wuxian like he hadn't even heard her, crowding into his space with every breath. He's a large man, and Wei Wuxian doesn't doubt that it's a very intimidating act, when used against normal people. He looks all the more flustered when Wei Wuxian doesn't back down, raising his voice even louder to talk over him as he says, "I saw her skulking around my stall earlier! I know what she—"

"That's enough," Wei Wuxian says. "I saw your stall collapse myself—"

"The lady did it, it wasn't me!" the girl interrupts, stamping her feet.

"—and the leg clearly collapsed on its own," Wei Wuxian says. "You can't possibly blame a child for rotten wood on your own stall."

He pulls his hand gently from the girl's grip, and she switches from tugging on his fist to tugging on the bottom of his robe with an insistent: "It. Wasn't. Me."

Wei Wuxian has half a mind to just ignore the man's arguments and leave him here, but he doesn't particularly want to start an even bigger fight in the middle of a busy street, and even he has enough sense to recognize that he shouldn't burn too many bridges with the townspeople before Lan Zhan even has a chance to start investigating.

The purse Lan Zhan had given him was far too heavy for a short trip to Lotus Pier, anyway—either Lan Zhan was expecting Jiang Cheng to charge him for the accomodation, or he'd severely overestimated the cost of the inns along the way. Wei Wuxian pulls out a silver piece, and only just resists the urge to fling it at the man's feet.

"For the buns," Wei Wuxian says, lighter than he feels. "Hopefully you can find a sturdy replacement for that leg."

Then Wei Wuxian startles him further when he steps around the man and stoops down to start dropping pork buns into one of the stall's toppled baskets. The man doesn't move until the

girl crouches down beside him to help, and even then he only blusters by to hover over them for a moment, like he's considering dragging the argument out.

Instead the man stomps up the steps of the building behind his toppled stall and disappears inside. The crowd disperses with equal swiftness, at least pretending to no longer pay attention to them as they pick scraps from the ground.

"I'm Wei Wuxian," he says lightly, when the little girl puts another dirty bun into his basket. She squints at him with incredible suspicion for a kid who hasn't quite lost all her baby fat.

"I'm Lian," she says sourly, and then, still squinting at him with open wariness, she adds, "I really didn't do it."

Ah, little Lian, what a pretty name. She has such a deathly serious expression on her tiny little face that he has to force himself to keep his smile in check. Instead he nods gravely, and she seems to relax a bit when she sees he's taking her so seriously.

"I know you didn't do it," Wei Wuxian says. "The lady did, is that right?" She nods. "Xiaolian, did you see her?"

She nods again, forcefully this time.

"I see her every time," she says, a little too loudly in her eagerness. "And she broke the leg. And she gets me in trouble."

"That's not very fair," Wei Wuxian says. He stacks the last of the buns into his basket, but doesn't stand. Xiaolian crouches beside him, tiny hands balanced on her dirty knees, not even attempting to hide her interest in the basket as he scoops it up with one hand. She hasn't pocketed any of them like he's certain he would have tried at her age, and the thought makes him smile.

"Xiaolian, where are your parents?" he asks, because he has to check. She shrugs, still staring at the basket, and he pretends the carefully nonchalant way she does it doesn't scrape at some deeply buried part of him.

"That one's dirty," she says, pointing. They're all a bit dirty, actually. He's picked them up off the ground after all.

"How about this," he says, like he's making a deal with her, and not with himself. "How about you tell me more about this lady, and I'll share my buns with you?"

She's definitely interested, but she surprises him by pursing her lips in very obvious thought. "Why?"

"Why? Why do I want to know more about the lady?" he asks. She nods.

Because he's pretty sure he felt something, before that stall collapsed, and he isn't sure what it was, but there's a good chance it's related to whatever Lan Zhan is coming to investigate. That might be a bit too much for him to explain to such a young kid, though, so he just puts on his friendliest smile and says, "Because I'm a cultivator. Do you know what that is?" She

nods again. “And if that lady is causing trouble, I’ll ask her to stop. I don’t live here, so I need a partner to help me.”

She purses her lips again, but doesn’t hesitate very long. “Partners,” she says decisively. Wei Wuxian grabs her hand gently when it darts out to grab one of the buns, and he tuts at her.

“Ah, wait a moment, let’s get out of the street,” he says. He’s been ignoring the irritated passersby as they crouched down to speak, but he wasn’t quite shameless enough to sit down for a meal in the middle of the road. He leads her back to the bridge before he deems them far enough to avoid any of the lingering eavesdroppers from earlier, and then he hoists her up onto the railing.

Wei Wuxian sits close enough to steady her if she starts to fall, and then sets the basket between them. He picks out one of the buns that had been saved from the dirt by it’s fellows and hands it to her, before grabbing a dirty one for himself.

She stuffs half of the bun into her mouth in one bite, while Wei Wuxian picks off pieces of gritty dough and flicks them into the river.

“Take smaller bites,” Wei Wuxian suggests, once she’s managed not to choke on the first one.

“I am,” she says through a mouthful. “I like this.” Wei Wuxian doesn’t really care for his husband’s no speaking while eating rule, but he has to admit that the half-chewed bun is a little gross.

“I like it too,” he says. He takes a bite, and then waits until she swallows again to ask, “So, what does this lady look like?”

“I don’t know,” she says with absolute certainty, and then stuffs the rest of the bun into her mouth.

“Didn’t you see her?” he asks.

“I saw her,” she says. Her nose scrunches up a little while she thinks, and it's the most adorable thing he’s ever seen. “She looks like. Um. I don’t know.”

“How do you know it’s a lady, if you don’t know what she looks like?” Wei Wuxian asks. He picks a piece of gritty dough off of another bun and hands the clean half of it to her.

“Because I see her, and she was a lady,” she says. Well, Wei Wuxian can’t argue with that. “It’s too dark,” she adds.

“Did you see her at night?” he asks.

“I see her lots. By the buns. By my bed.” She shrugs. “Are you gonna talk to her?”

“If I can,” he says. “I’m waiting for my husband, and we’re going to investigate it together.”

Wei Wuxian’s not entirely certain how this lady, whoever she is, is related to whatever Lan Zhan is coming to investigate. This lady, if she is what he’d sensed earlier, hadn’t seemed

malicious at all, and he doubts they would need to request help from one of the main sects just to deal with her. It wouldn't be unreasonable for a city of this size to have a few harmless spirits that hadn't attracted enough attention for a cultivator to be called in, or hadn't done enough harm to be noticed by its less spiritually attuned citizens.

"Your husband? Who's your husband?" Xiaolian asks.

"He's a cultivator too," Wei Wuxian says. "He lives far away, but he's coming to visit, because someone asked for his help. I was going to surprise him, but I got here too early." It's getting pretty late already, and since Wei Wuxian doesn't know when they're arriving or what inn they plan to stay in, he's probably going to have to get a room for himself tonight and try to find them tomorrow.

"I'm going to rent a room and see if I can find him in the morning. Do you want to come with me tonight?" he asks. He's expecting the same enthusiasm that she's put into every bite of those buns, so he glances over when she doesn't respond. That careful, suspicious look is back in full force.

"Why?" she asks.

God, he was never this suspicious at her age. Although, actually, that was probably not a good thing. He'd been pretty lucky when Uncle Jiang found him, and that no one had tried to take advantage of his naturally happy disposition. He doesn't love to think about the fact that no one had given him reason to be a suspicious kid, because that just makes him wonder what reasons Xiaolian might have to look at him so warily.

"Why?" he asks. He hops down from his seat on the railing and turns toward her, hands on his hips, and smiles. "Because we're partners. Won't you help me investigate?"

"Hm," she says. "Okay."

He wraps the rest of the buns up in a little parcel for her to carry, which she accepts with both hands and the air of a person being bestowed a weighty responsibility, and then steers her back across the bridge with a light touch on the back of her head. He'd made note of the inns he'd seen on the way into the city. He tries to guess which one Lan Zhan might pick, if he and the juniors arrive at the city late, and steers Xiaolian that way. The restaurant is still busy with the remainder of the dinner crowd, but the entryway to the inn is cloistered in a neighboring building, and much quieter. There's a single woman standing behind the counter. She doesn't see him at first, so he wanders up and raps lightly on the wood to get her attention.

"I'd like to rent a room, with two beds if possible," he says. They'd just eaten, but a handful of buns wasn't exactly a real meal, so he adds, "And if you could send tea and dinner for two up to the room—"

“Yes of course,” she says. She scrapes the silver he places on the counter into her palm.

“Do you have laundry service?” he asks. He turns down to Xiaolian, who’s probably squishing her buns with how tightly she’s clutching them, and taps her shoulder to get her attention. “Would you like to take a bath today, or tomorrow?”

The innkeeper leans over the counter to look, for a moment looking charmed. Then she spots Xiaolian, and her expression sours. “Ah! Go stand outside,” she snaps at her, startling Wei Wuxian with her tone. “You know you’re not supposed to be in here.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Wei Wuxian asks.

“Young Master, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize,” she says, though she doesn’t sound particularly sorry at all. Instead of apologizing for her behavior, she slides the silver Wei Wuxian just handed her back over the counter. He stares at it. “We can’t accept your money.”

Next to him, Xiaolian shifts nervously and eyes the door. He takes her little hand in his.

“If you’d like a room. A single, then of course we can help you,” she says. “Otherwise I’m afraid you can’t stay here.”

“Why not?” Wei Wuxian snaps. “You have the money there. Here.” He adds a little more with a frustrated clink.

She only bows her head further, not meeting his eyes. When she speaks, it’s very softly, like she doesn’t want the other patrons to hear.

“It’s not the money. It’s the girl. She’s… cursed,” she whispers, like some terrible secret. Wei Wuxian frowns at that.

“You can’t be serious,” he says, and if he’s making a habit of picking fights today, then Lan Zhan will just have to deal with it. The innkeeper keeps her head bowed and doesn’t answer. After a moment, he scrapes the money off the counter. Xiaolian clings to his neck without argument when he stoops down to pick her up, and she doesn’t even complain when one of the buns tumbles out of her grip to the floor. Wei Wuxian doesn’t even try to disguise his frustration when he stomps out the door.

He’s still carrying Xiaolian when he walks into the next inn, and this time he’s barely through the entryway before a young man reaches out to stop him.

At the next inn, he refuses to leave, demanding to speak with the owner.

“What kind of curse?” he demands, knowing it's ridiculous as he says it. He hasn’t seen a curse mark, and even if it was hidden, he’s certain he would have noticed any sort of resentful energy surrounding her.

“Young Master, you must understand. The girl destroys everything she comes into contact with. She was born cursed, everyone around here knows it. It’s very noble of you, to want to help her, but I can’t afford the risk. I have four daughters. My youngest is still a baby herself.”

“Then just rent us your worst room, and I’ll pay for any damages,” Wei Wuxian says.

“It’s not so simple,” she says. She wrings her hands for a moment before leaning in, like speaking the words out loud might tempt fate. “This girl is an orphan, because every house that takes her in falls to ruin. She is a blight. Her grandmother’s house burned to the ground, on the very coldest night of the year, and took every soul but hers. The father of the family who took her in suffered a terrible fall. Even her own mother wanted nothing to do with her, and disappeared without a word.”

“That’s hardly—”

“She has destroyed carriages. Killed pets. And I’ve heard that just today, a food stall in the marketplace, and all its contents.”

“Enough,” Wei Wuxian says. When he glances at Xiaolian, she seems completely unbothered by the woman’s account, but she’s clinging to his neck very tightly, with her knees poking into his side. “If you won’t rent me a room, give me someone who will.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and ushers him out without offering him a name.

Wei Wuxian is standing in the street, wondering where to go next, when Xiaolian squirms to be put down. Once he’s set her on her feet, she pats his hand reassuringly. He is instantly charmed, the knot of anger and frustration uncurling into an ache that’s no more comfortable, and harder to swallow.

No wonder she’s so suspicious, if this is her normal. He scrapes up every ounce of his self control to keep his voice light and carefree, and takes her tiny hand.

“Oh well,” he says. “It’s a nice night, so maybe I’ll sleep outside, if that’s okay with you.”

“I’ll show you my bed,” she says, and tugs him forward. “It’s a good spot. You can borrow it, and then when your husband comes, you can sleep at his house.”

“Good idea,” Wei Wuxian says, and lets himself be led along. He still has vague memories of sleeping outside, in stolen spaces in stables or empty alleyways, so he’s expecting it when she leads him back over the bridge and into the first alleyway past it.

He sits down where she points him, and when he presses his back against the wall it’s warm to the touch. The ground is fairly clean, and there’s a pleasant smell, a mixture of spice from someone’s dinner, and the muddy, green smell of the river that immediately sends him back to Lotus Pier.

“This is a good spot,” Wei Wuxian says, and he’s not even lying. He can see the arch of the bridge from here, and the first slip of the moon climbing over the water. He could paint this.

Wei Wuxian crosses his legs, and then pulls her into his lap, so she doesn’t have to sit on the hard ground. From his qiankun pouch he pulls cold tea that he’d steeped that morning, and the lotus cakes he’d meant to bring back to Cloud Recesses with him. He trades them to her for her dirty buns, and then helps her unwrap the paper around one of the cakes to eat.

She tries to stuff the whole thing in her mouth, and he has to remind her again to take smaller bites. Xiaolian eats the cakes like she hasn't eaten all day, like it's the last meal she's ever going to eat. He helps her with the lid on the tea, and she keeps glancing up at him like he's going to take everything away again when she thinks he's not paying attention. He has to turn his face away and blink at the night sky for a moment, because he remembers that feeling so well that it's suddenly hard to breathe around the tightening ache in his chest, what it's like to be hungry and not know where the next scraps will come from. She finishes the cakes and the tea all by herself, and then Wei Wuxian wraps it all up in his pouch again.

He brushes one hand over her hair, scratches his blunt nails against her scalp in a way he always found soothing when he was little, when Yanli used to help him fall asleep. He begins to hum quietly. She watches him owlishly for a while, but when he doesn't ask anything else of her, she finally snuggles deeper into his lap, and tips her head back against his chest. She falls asleep with the moon edging slowly up into the sky, and Wei Wuxian keeps humming softly into the night.

At first he doesn't think anything of the fog that rolls over the river, first swallowing the bridge and then cloaking everything, even the few feet in front of him, in a muffled quiet. It's late enough that the streets are empty, and Xiaolian is a dead weight in his lap as she sleeps.

He's dozing between the warm lump in his arms and the warm stone at his back, but even half-asleep he feels the slight shift of air around him, like the static prickling of a dead limb after heavy sleep. It's the same feeling that passed over him earlier, just before the bun stall collapsed, but when Wei Wuxian glances around for a source, he doesn't see anything through the fog.

Slowly, Wei Wuxian shifts to pull Chenqing from his belt and then slides an arm under Xiaolian to lift her up. She doesn't so much as stir through all his jostling. It's a little awkward to prop her against his shoulder and still keep his hands free to hold Chenqing, but the alternative is to leave her where she is, and that's not going to happen. He searches for that creeping feeling, but it's gone. The night is strangely still, like all the world has gone to sleep. He reaches out with his senses and finds nothing but a cool cottony emptiness.

The fog is so thick that Wei Wuxian has nearly stepped onto the bridge before he realizes that he's not alone. There is a single shadow in the center of the bridge, just the right size to be a man. It could just be a citizen out for a late-night stroll, as surprised to see Wei Wuxian as he is to see them.

It stands perfectly still. Unease prickles at the back of his neck. The night air is still, but the bridge creaks ominously as though buffeted by the wind.

It's impossible to make out anything more through the fog, but just as Wei Wuxian shifts Xiaolian higher, so that he can run his fingers over the lacquered surface of his flute, considering whether he should try to do anything with a baby in his arms, or whether he should risk it getting away—

He blinks, and the stench of rotting bodies rolls over him. He dodges back without seeing, and something lurches out of the fog to swipe at the space he's just left. It shudders when the swipe catches nothing, and there's no mistaking it for a person. Wei Wuxian feels Xiaolian shift, and he presses her face into his shoulder.

"Don't look," he says lightly, already dodging back again, "and hold on tight." The thing, whatever it is, vanishes between one breath and the next.

He tries to stretch his senses through the fog, but the resentment feels strangely distant. He turns in a slow circle, but he can't seem to pin it down. The rotting smell comes again, and Xiaolian gags and covers her nose. The shroud lifts briefly when it gets close, and he feels a flash of resentful energy before he dodges back into the fog.

A fierce corpse lurches forward, but not with the same shambling clumsiness he'd expected, as he'd seen so many times during the war, with Wen Ruohan's puppets. Something about it isn't right. The corpse turns and follows him with its eyes as he dances away. It's gaze is chillingly keen. He leaps back toward the railing of the bridge to escape its reach. He hears the thump of footsteps and is surprised by how quickly the thing is moving. He's so caught off guard that it takes him a moment to realize it's not running toward him, but away.

Wei Wuxian lifts Chenqing to his lips when he feels that Xiaolian has a good grip on his robes.

The first note is like a knife through the silence. It hangs in the air, probing, but nothing calls back to him. He turns in a slow circle, but he can't see anything through the unnatural fog, so he lets the note shift into a song. If he was alone, it would be a summons; come closer, let me see you, what do you want—

But he's not alone, so he lets it be gentle and searching, just enough to be certain that it—whatever it was—is gone. He feels the fog shift around him, and suddenly the sounds of the night come rushing back—the trickle of water under the bridge, litter frogs chirruping in the grass. Something crunches on the gravel of the road behind him, and Wei Wuxian twirls toward the sound.

A figure in white melts out of the rapidly clearing fog, and then five more follow. Wei Wuxian lets his shoulders slump.

"Lan Zhan!" he says. He smiles, a little in relief, but mostly at the look on Lan Zhan's face, surprised but happy to see him. "Did you see that thing? I couldn't get a good look through this fog, but it really wasn't happy to see me."

Lan Zhan looks like he's got no idea what Wei Wuxian is talking about, so he's going to take that as a no.

"We heard Chenqing," Lan Zhan says.

Xiaolian, seeming to realize that his order not to look has expired, turns her head to the side to peer at the Lan cultivators. Lan Zhan can't possibly have only just noticed her now, but that doesn't stop him from staring. He looks confused for exactly one moment. Then his

expression goes adorably, embarrassingly soft, which is why Wei Wuxian can't help but cackle when Xiaolian turns back to him with complete bafflement and says:

"Who's that *angry* man?"

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan says helplessly, ears tinging red while Wei Wuxian doubles over laughing. Xiaolian giggles with him as the move tips her precariously sideways, and this time when she clutches at his neck, it's not with any real fear.

"He's not angry! He's very nice," Wei Wuxian says, to much skepticism. "That's my husband. Remember? I told you about him."

"Hm," she says. Her cheek is squished up against his shoulder, and he can tell that she's stifling a yawn. He did wake her up in the middle of the night, and she's pretty little, so he's not surprised that she's tired. "Okay. He can help us find the lady. And then you go back to his house."

"Mhm," Wei Wuxian says, rubbing a hand over her shoulders. He ignores the truly curious look on the juniors' faces (very obvious) and Lan Zhan's face (also very obvious, but probably only to him) and drops his voice to say, "Lan Zhan, I missed you. Also, Jiang Cheng says hello."

"Hm," Lan Zhan says doubtfully.

"Well, not in so many words," Wei Wuxian admits, which earns him a slightly raised eyebrow. "Anyway, I got your letter, so I decided to meet you here."

"I see," Lan Zhan says.

"Jiang Cheng didn't mind, he said we could come back again soon," Wei Wuxian says, which is almost true, minus the 'we' and the 'soon'. Wei Wuxian doesn't think he would actually turn them away if he brings Lan Zhan along, although he'll keep that fact that they haven't been explicitly invited to himself. Lan Zhan makes a little disinterested noise, because he never enjoys visiting his brother-in-law even now that their outright dislike of each other has cooled to polite tolerance for Wei Wuxian's sake. Wei Wuxian doesn't mind, because he knows Lan Zhan will go whenever he asks, anyway.

"When did you arrive?" Lan Zhan asks, but he's looking at the child in Wei Wuxian's arms, and the question is clearly, *whose baby is this*, and maybe, *should I be concerned?*

"I left basically as soon as I got your letter, so I got here this morning," Wei Wuxian says. "And then I walked around the markets for a while, and that's when I found her." He gestures toward the dead weight in his arms with his chin.

"Senior Wei, who's child is that?" Lan Xue asks.

"I'm still working that out," Wei Wuxian says, "but she's important for the investigation. I think. Sorry, Lan Zhan, you took too long to get here, so I've replaced you with a much cuter partner."

“Partner,” Xiaolian agrees sleepily, and Wei Wuxian grins at Lan Zhan as though to say *see? How cute are we?* It earns him a tiny, if long suffering, smile.

“Where are you staying?” Lan Zhan asks quietly.

“Ah, about that,” Wei Wuxian says, and Lan Zhan follows his gaze to the alley, where his bags and a bunched up blanket are still propped against the wall.

“Do you not have money for a room?” Lan Zhan asks. He doesn’t even hide how deeply disapproving he sounds, like Wei Wuxian spent it all on wine or stupid trinkets (...which, to be fair, he has done before). He fishes the purse Lan Zhan gave him out of his sleeve and shakes it.

“I tried to get a room. No one would let us in,” he says. He folds the purse back into his sleeve. Lan Zhan’s expression goes dark and protective in a way that would be very thrilling, if he could do anything about it. Wei Wuxian sighs and shakes his head. “Not because of me, they have no idea who I am. Because of her.” Wei Wuxian is kind of expecting a moment of understanding here, but he doesn’t get one. “Everyone here seems convinced she’s cursed,” he clarifies. “Isn’t that why they asked Cloud Recesses to send some cultivators?”

“No,” Lan Zhan says. “We have heard nothing about a curse. Two women have been found dead so far. The local magistrate believes it is the work of a demon.”

“I’ve been here since this morning, and I haven’t heard anything about this,” Wei Wuxian says. He thinks fierce corpses might be a little more likely, with what he’d seen on the bridge, but that explanation doesn’t quite sit right with him, either.

“He is attempting to keep it quiet, to avoid panic,” Lan Zhan says. To avoid a scandal, more likely, that might hurt his reappointment. Wei Wuxian scoffs.

“Two women end up dead, but they’re afraid of a little girl,” he says.

“You said she has been cursed?” Lan Zhan asks, a little skeptically. Wei Wuxian waves him off immediately, and then goes back to soothing his hand over her shoulders. His other arm is going a little numb as she seems to grow heavier and heavier against him, so even though her face is turned away, he’s pretty sure she’s fallen back asleep. He flexes his fingers to get the blood flowing.

“She’s not cursed. She’s, well. We can discuss theories tomorrow. It’s pretty late, so you should get rooms before the juniors fall over.” A couple of postures straighten a little at that, as though they hadn’t been slowly listing sideways through the entire conversation. “Go on, I know you’re tired.”

“You’re coming,” Lan Zhan says.

“I’m not gonna leave her out here alone,” Wei Wuxian argues. Lan Zhan doesn’t even justify that with a response, and Wei Wuxian rolls his eyes. “Ah, Lan Zhan, you’re so stubborn. They’re not going to let her in! I already tried.”

“You’re coming,” Lan Zhan says, and putting a hand under Wei Wuxian’s arm, steers him away from the bridge.

“My bags—” Wei Wuxian cranes his neck around to look, but one of the more eager juniors is already trailing after them with her arms full. Wei Wuxian sighs again. “Fine, you’ll see.”

Lan Zhan does not, as it turns out, see.

Wei Wuxian hasn’t forgotten how stubborn his husband can be—he is reminded quite often, thank you—but it is one thing to know that, and another to see it in action.

They end up back in the first inn. The innkeeper’s eyes are shiny and pleased upon seeing Lan Zhan’s elegant dress and equally fat purse, and Wei Wuxian gets to see her expression flip to just the polite side of annoyance when she sees him walk in after him.

Lan Zhan doesn’t miss it either, if his frosty expression is anything to go by, but ever the polite gentleman, he steps up to the desk and bows just slightly in greeting.

“Good evening,” she says directly to Lan Zhan. Wei Wuxian stands a bit behind him, like he’s waiting his turn, and he realizes, when she pointedly doesn’t acknowledge him, that she thinks he’s back to appeal to her alone. She’s probably waiting for the elegant young master to leave, so that she can give him the boot in privacy.

“How can I help you?”

“We will need four rooms, with two beds each. Dinner and tea, as well.”

“Of course,” she bows a little, and flicks the tiniest glance at Wei Wuxian before turning away. “You’re in luck. These are our last empty rooms.” She directs them to the four rooms up the stairs, at the very end of the hall, and asks what kind of tea they would like, and all the while not looking at Wei Wuxian, like he’ll slink out on his own if only she doesn’t acknowledge him.

Lan Zhan pays, thanks her. Then he turns to Wei Wuxian, and nods toward the stairs.

“Ah,” she says, a little too loudly. Her eyes have gone very wide, whether from her outburst or Lan Zhan’s sudden attention. “Ah, forgive me. Are you—”

“My husband,” Lan Zhan says, and apparently they’re not waiting for her opinion on that, because he puts a hand on Wei Wuxian’s back and starts steering him toward the stairs.

“Young master, just a moment.” She comes around the desk, but she looks a little sick at having to do it when she meets Lan Zhan’s stony expression. Wei Wuxian understands, although he’s not feeling particularly sympathetic at the moment. He’s just tired, mostly, and a little numb, but only in his left arm.

Lan Zhan dismisses the juniors with a single look, and the innkeeper looks even more dismayed as they swish up the stairs.

“Hanguang Jun, that girl. Are you aware—” She trails off, but Lan Zhan makes no attempt to rescue her. “The girl is cursed,” she says plaintively.

Lan Zhan’s reply is an immediate and dismissive, “Hm.”

“And... and I’ve told your husband,” She glances over at him, “that we cannot afford the risk of housing her.”

“If it is monetary risk, rest assured, Gusu Lan will pay for any damages,” he says. “If it is this supposed curse itself, then I can only assure you that every disciple of Gusu Lan is trained in breaking spiritual curses. I will see to it personally.” The unspoken *and it would be an insult to doubt me* is heavily implied.

Lan Zhan, who hasn’t taken his hand off Wei Wuxian’s back during the entire encounter, nudges him gently toward the stairs. Wei Wuxian leans into the touch just slightly as Lan Zhan brushes her off again with a very firm, “Good night.”

“Ah, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispers, as Lan Zhan slides the door open for him. The disciples rooms are closed, but he could still see lights under each of the doors as they passed, waiting for food and tea. He almost expects them to spit in it, except that the innkeeper had recognized Lan Zhan, so she wouldn’t dare. “That was your plan? Just blow right past her? I can’t believe you bullied her into letting us stay.”

“You deserve a bed,” Lan Zhan says. “It would be foolish, even if she was truly cursed.”

Wei Wuxian sighs as he eases the sleeping bundle onto one of the beds, gently brushing the hair out of her face. She’s all kinds of grimy, but there’s no point in waking her up now, so he tucks the blankets around her. Tomorrow he’ll wrestle her into a bath, if she’ll let him, and see if the inn has a laundry service for her robe, if they don’t try to kick them out again at the first opportunity.

Strong arms slide around his waist, pulling him close, and Wei Wuxian melts into them. It’s been a week since he’s been able to just let Lan Zhan hold him, and that is far too long. When he turns around to face him so that they’re pressed chest to chest, Lan Zhan’s expression softens. Wei Wuxian can’t help but smile back at him, lean in to kiss the corner of his mouth, his cheek.

They stand in the middle of the room, just holding each other, trading soft kisses between sighs, until someone knocks quietly on the door.

“Have you eaten?” Lan Zhan asks, and his eyes slide over to the bed in a silent question before he turns quietly to the door. Wei Wuxian trails after him, reluctant to let go, but he sits down at the table anyway when Lan Zhan gestures for him to sit.

“Don’t wake her. We ate more than you have, probably,” Wei Wuxian says. He doesn’t mention that most of his own dinner had been picked up off the ground. “But I’ll sit with you

while you eat."

Lan Zhan sets the tray down quietly between them, pours tea, and Wei Wuxian just leans on his fist and stares and smiles as this ridiculous, stubborn man starts filling two bowls to feed him anyway.

"You said you do not believe she is cursed," Lan Zhan says, prompting, and then he picks up his chopsticks and begins to eat.

Wei Wuxian gives him an abridged version of his day, Lan Zhan occasionally humming encouragement, pausing or frowning when Wei Wuxian glosses over the steamed buns, which he hadn't told him about, and the innkeeper, which he had.

"They seem to think she's cursed, but I really don't think that's it," Wei Wuxian says, popping vegetables into his mouth as quickly as Lan Zhan can put them in his bowl. "For one thing, a curse that just causes disasters would be pretty strong, and I doubt it would stay so localized." He pauses.

"She mentioned a lady," he says, and Lan Zhan shoots him an inquisitive look. "Yeah, I thought it was interesting, too. Of course, she's pretty young. She could just be talking about a woman she's met, or. I don't know, an imaginary friend." Lan Zhan looks like he wants to say something, so he pauses to see if he will.

"Sizhui was very imaginative, at that age," Lan Zhan agrees quietly, and Wei Wuxian's heart immediately pangs at the tiny smile he wears at the memory. It's ridiculous to be jealous that Lan Zhan got those moments, and the last thing he wants is for Lan Zhan not to share them with him, so Wei Wuxian shoots him a little smile of his own. His husband probably sees right through him, but that's okay, because he can always ask him about it later, and then tease Sizhui mercilessly with the details.

Of course, he'd have to tease Lan Zhan for being so soft, too, because imaginative sounds suspiciously like a word Wei Wuxian would have chosen if he was trying to get around the consequences of breaking the Lan Sect's rule against lying.

"Mn, I thought about it," Wei Wuxian says. "But when I asked her to describe her, she couldn't. All she said was where she'd seen her, and that this lady got her in trouble. I think if she was just playing, she wouldn't have trouble making up the details." Lan Zhan nods at this logic, back to quietly eating, and occasionally refilling Wei Wuxian's bowl or tea. He's barely going to eat any of it himself at this rate, so Wei Wuxian starts filling his bowl right back with bits of tofu and greens.

"Anyway, I don't think she's really cursed. I think these people are just superstitious, and a child is an easy target for their fears." He scowls at his bowl, chews thoughtfully. "Honestly, it's more likely got something to do with whatever I saw on that bridge. I swear I sensed this lady—or whatever it is—just before that thing showed up." He sighs. "It looked like a fierce corpse, but… I don't know. It was definitely resentful. I wish I'd gotten a better look at it."

Lan Zhan clearly disagrees with that. He sets his chopsticks down, and quietly finishes his tea.

“I agree, that she is likely not cursed,” he says after a moment. He quietly stacks their empty dishes, considering each word. “As for the creature on the bridge—we have arranged to meet the local magistrate before lunch tomorrow. We will begin our investigation then.”

“You said he thinks it's a demon killing women, right? I’ll come with you, of course. We can ask about Xiaolian’s situation while we’re there,” Wei Wuxian says, stretching his arms back until his shoulders pop. Lan Zhan hums vaguely, but his disapproving look at his posture would be much more convincing if he weren’t looking at him like… well, like he’s missed Wei Wuxian this week as much as he’s missed Lan Zhan.

Wei Wuxian had shucked his outer robe almost the moment he’d gotten in the door, but he’s always happy to help Lan Zhan with all of those complicated layers.

Lan Zhan gives him the world's tiniest raised eyebrow when Wei Wuxian bats his hands away to undo his belt and flicks a very pointed look over Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, to the adorable little bundle there. Wei Wuxian still thrills at the idea of being teased, even this many years into their marriage, and he could get Lan Zhan out of his robes in the dark with his hands tied, so he just grins and slides closer, until they’re nearly chest to chest.

“How shameless, Lan Zhan. Can’t I help my husband get comfortable for bed?” he asks, and brushes a kiss over his husband’s jaw, the corner of his mouth. He slips his outer robes over his shoulders. “Must my intentions be impure?”

Lan Zhan’s ears are very pink, but he looks deeply amused regardless.

“My mistake,” he says, and bows his head slightly so that Wei Wuxian can tug at the pins holding his hair in place, picking apart the hairpiece. Wei Wuxian runs his fingers through the loose strands of hair he shakes free. He undoes the forehead ribbon last, folding it carefully in his hands, and kisses the end of it.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, you can’t look at me like that,” he says when he glances back up. Wei Wuxian would be embarrassed at the way those words come out slightly breathless, if he wasn’t trying very hard to calm his hammering heart. It would be one thing if Lan Zhan was only affected by his teasing, but the look he’s giving him isn’t even heated. It’s just unbearably fond, in a way that still surprises him, even after all this time.

“Mn, apologies,” Lan Zhan says, and he lets Wei Wuxian climb into the empty bed first so that he can pull Lan Zhan down between himself and the rest of the room. Wei Wuxian curls around him as Lan Zhan whisks out the lights with a flick of his fingers.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian whispers, when Lan Zhan doesn’t immediately drop into his easy, disciplined sleep. There’s a thoughtful quiet, long enough that Wei Wuxian would have thought Lan Zhan had fallen asleep after all, if not for the tiny shifting to pull him closer.

“Xiaolian,” he says eventually. “Have you searched for her family?”

“She’s an orphan,” Wei Wuxian says. “I’m not sure about next of kin. If she has any, they haven’t taken her in.”

“What would you like to do?” Lan Zhan asks, after a long moment.

“I don’t know. Help her,” he says. That answer is easy. Lan Zhan’s fingers are tracing a soothing pattern between his shoulders, and it’s easy to keep his head tucked under his chin, where he won’t have to face him directly, even in the dark. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead, I just…”

He trails off, not really sure what to say. Wei Wuxian knows he’s being very transparent here, but Lan Zhan has the decency not to point it out. Wei Wuxian kisses his jaw chastely, loath to give up the comfort of Lan Zhan's arms around him, not to mention he’s still very aware of the tiny body fast asleep in the second bed. Lan Zhan hums, and the arms around him tighten in quiet acknowledgement.

“We will discuss it tomorrow,” Lan Zhan promises. “Sleep. I will wake you early.”

“Not too early.”

“Early,” Lan Zhan insists, and tilts his head down to capture Wei Wuxian’s lips for one more kiss before they settle in for sleep.

Chapter 2

Something stabs Wei Wuxian in the cheek, and the sharp pain, combined with a vaguely sticky wetness, is enough to drag him out of the deepest, warmest sleep. He's bundled in blankets, face squished into a pillow that still smells like his husband, and he hasn't slept so well in a week.

He cracks an eye open just in time to see Lan Zhan gently pry a chopstick out of Xiaolian's chubby fingers, looking deeply disapproving.

"Someone needs to teach you manners," Wei Wuxian grumbles, and she has the audacity to look him in the eye and say, "No." He can't even bring himself to be too annoyed, because she is truly too cute. Lan Zhan brushes his thumb over Wei Wuxian's cheek, wiping away the stickiness with such tenderness that he has to squeeze his eyes shut and squish his face into the pillow to breathe.

"Eat," Lan Zhan says. When Wei Wuxian risks a peek, he's placing her back at the table. There are settings for three people, but Wei Wuxian can see that Lan Zhan has already eaten his own breakfast and set the dishes aside.

"Time to wake up!" Xiaolian says around her spoon.

"No speaking while eating," Lan Zhan says. She doesn't really look like she's listening, and Wei Wuxian probably shouldn't be pleased that she doesn't want to listen to Lan Zhan, either, but it is a little funny.

It's completely usual for Lan Zhan to have eaten and dressed by the time Wei Wuxian manages to crawl out of bed, even if he can tell by the blue light of the windows and the cotton ball feeling behind his eyes that it's still hours earlier than his preferred time to rise.

Still, Lan Zhan usually waits for Wei Wuxian to replace his ribbon for him, unless he has business to attend to. Wei Wuxian sits up a little, and sees that he's holding his shoes in one hand.

"Going somewhere?" he asks. Lan Zhan nods.

"If you are awake," he says, with absolutely zero judgment, and what sounds like full permission to roll back over and sleep for another three hours. Instead, Wei Wuxian crawls to a sitting position, and drags the blanket over to the table with him. "I will be back soon," Lan Zhan promises, and leans down for a quick, but not very chaste, kiss.

Wei Wuxian supervises as Xiaolian devours her congee with passion. When she scrapes the bottom of her bowl and turns on him, he gives her a bite of his, so he's still helping her wash away the spice with some of Lan Zhan's tea when someone knocks on the door.

"I'll peel you an orange instead," he promises, setting the fruit beside her bowl as he stands for the door.

Wei Wuxian pauses to throw on an outer robe and quickly cinch the waist, not wanting to scandalize anyone, and then opens the door, half-expecting one of the juniors to be waiting for instructions, or maybe to make certain that he's awake. He's surprised to see a young woman instead, a bucket of steaming water in each hand. She's not the woman from the night before—her daughter, maybe, if he's a decent judge of her age. She looks around warily, like she's not certain what to expect.

"Hanguang Jun ordered a bath," she explains. Wei Wuxian abruptly realizes he's blocking the door. He stands aside to let her through, and then grabs two buckets off the cart behind her. The whole time she's in the room, she watches Xiaolian out of the corner of her eye, like she's afraid what might happen if she lets her guard down. She barely seems bothered by her guest doing her job for her, if only to make the work go faster, and bows a very quick exit once they've emptied the last bucket into the tub.

"Do you want to take a bath?" Wei Wuxian asks, and then realizes his mistake when she gives him another very matter-of-fact, "No."

"Well, I'm not really asking," he says. "So why don't we—" he pauses to scoop her under the arms, setting her beside the tub, "—hop in the water. You'll feel better afterwards, I promise."

She squints at him, and then with surprisingly little fuss, shrugs. "Fine."

"Do you need help?" he asks cheerily. She shoots him an unimpressed look that could rival Lan Zhan's.

"I *can* do it," she says. "I don't need help."

She repeats that about four more times, once with extra fervor when Wei Wuxian tries to convince her to let him wash her hair, since she's mostly just getting it wet, but then he's content to let her splash around while he finishes his now-cold congee and lukewarm tea.

"I don't *need* help!" Xiaolian insists again. Wei Wuxian swallows his mouthful of tea, with assurances of her great capabilities already on his tongue. Then, something gentle brushes over his shoulders, like an icy hand trying to hold him still, and a chill prickles down his spine.

Wei Wuxian turns toward the tub, and for just a moment he sees it. The silhouette of a woman, more shadow than form, one hand braced on the rim of the tub, the other reaching out—

Wei Wuxian moves to snatch Chenqing off the table, knocks his congee bowl off onto the floor in his haste, but in the time it takes for him to glance away to find the dizi, the tub shatters.

Xiaolian shrieks. The water surges across the floor in a sudsy wave as he dives to catch her before she falls. She's too shocked to react at first, staring wide eyed at the mess, but then she looks at him, almost stunned, like she hasn't decided how upset she should be. Wei Wuxian tries to school his features, remembering how the youngest disciples in Yunmeng would

always look to him when they were trying to decide whether to cry over a bump or a fall. He's not quite quick enough, because when she sees his expression, her lip wobbles.

"Ah, Xiaolian, it's all right." Wei Wuxian smooths a hand over her wet hair, pulling apart the tangles. "That startled me, too!"

It's no use. She wails into his sleeve, but she is clearly more startled than hurt. Wei Wuxian quickly bundles her into a fresh towel and deposits her on the bed, just as someone begins knocking on the door.

She sobs, "I didn't do it!"

"I know," Wei Wuxian says. "It was the lady, wasn't it?" She nods. "I saw her too." He glances toward the door, where whoever is in the hall is still knocking. It's very polite for the level of commotion, so it's probably not the innkeeper coming to tell him off. "You're not in trouble," he promises her, and that, at least, seems to calm her slightly. "I'm going to get that."

Thankfully when Wei Wuxian slides the door open it's only Lan Jie, and not the scowling innkeeper, who would probably be feeling pretty vindicated right now. She stumbles back a step as a little gush of water escapes into the hall. He might have laughed at the girl's face as water trickles around her shoes, if he wasn't the one who was going to have to clean it all up.

"Senor Wei," she says, with obvious curiosity and very unsubtle glances over his shoulder. He would think it unbefitting of a Lan disciple to so clearly be looking for gossip, if he didn't happen to know that all of Lan Jingyi's close cousins, herself included, were like this. "Are you all right?"

Wei Wuxian glances back at the mess, with the broken shards of tub and sudsy water everywhere. It looks like a disaster zone. Xiaolian completes the picture, bundled in a mound of towels and scowling miserably on the bed with her little legs swinging over the edge. He can't help but laugh a little.

"We're fine, just a bit of a mess. Do you think you can find us some more towels?" he asks. She nods, and Wei Wuxian sides the door shut behind him before she can lean over for another peek.

"Let's get you dressed in case anyone else gets curious about the noise," Wei Wuxian says, "and then we'll clean this up."

"Do I clean it?" she asks, as he wrestles her, for lack of a better option, back into her dirty robe. Even with Wei Wuxian's assurances, she looks so sad. There's definitely some Lan rule about instilling responsibility that applies here, but Wei Wuxian is a sucker for those watery eyes.

"No, I'll clean it," he says. "How about you finish breakfast on the bed?"

He turns back to their food, and pauses. His congee bowl is back on the table, contents half-floating in sudsy water, but neatly upright again. He pushes it aside to grab the unpeeled

orange beside Xiaolian's plate. Half of the peel has been shorn off, little fragrant scraps piled up next to it on the table. The meat inside is torn in jagged lines through the wedges, four long tracks in the flesh. The cuts are ragged, not like the clean lines of a knife, but like… well, like it was torn into by sharp nails.

Wei Wuxian glances from Xiaolian to the mess, but she's not sticky handed. Wei Wuxian frowns, and peels the other half of the orange to inspect it. It looks perfectly normal. He hands it to Xiaolian with a vague sense of unease, but when he glances back to check that the lady has truly gone, there's nothing but a still and quiet room.

Lan Zhan returns when Wei Wuxian has nearly finished mopping up the flooded floor, but even if the broken bathtub and his soaked knees aren't an indication of what has happened, the mound of sopping wet fabric by the door tells a perfectly clear story. Lan Zhan hums thoughtfully from the doorway, and Xiaolian looks nervous again for a brief moment, but he only turns to Wei Wuxian with a slightly raised eyebrow before stepping delicately over the still drying floor.

"The innkeeper is going to hate us," Wei Wuxian says.

"Mn," Lan Zhan says.

"I saw the lady," Wei Wuxian says casually, once he has finished explaining how they managed to flood their bedroom while he was gone. Lan Zhan sets a stack of packages on the bed, one of the only surfaces that isn't damp.

"What did you see?" he asks. He goes to inspect the broken bathtub. There's nothing much to see; the hoops along one side had split, as though too much pressure had been put on the nails holding it in place, and the whole thing had come apart under the weight of the water inside.

"It was definitely a woman," he says. "I thought I sensed her again, and when I looked over I could see the shadow of her leaning over the bath."

"And then it exploded!" Xiaolian shouts. After recovering from the shock, crying it out a bit, and finally realizing that Wei Wuxian wasn't going to shout at her, she had quickly swung from scared to completely energized by the experience. She kicks her feet for emphasis.

"And then it exploded," Wei Wuxian agrees. "But I don't think—it didn't *feel* malicious. At least, not intentionally." He doesn't mention the orange on the table, shredded flesh and leaking juice.

"Hm," Lan Zhan says. "Regardless, damage was done. The action does not need to be intentional to cause harm."

Boy, did Wei Wuxian know it.

“Maybe we should try Inquiry, see if we can talk to her?” Wei Wuxian suggests. She’d been there and gone in a second, too fast for him to react to her presence, let alone try to communicate with her. He isn’t sure if they’ll be able to call the spirit to them, or if they’ll have to wait for her to appear, but at least this way they would be able to ask her what she wanted.

“Hm. We must meet with the magistrate,” Lan Zhan says, which is a solid *maybe later*.

“All right, we’ll see what he has to say, first,” Wei Wuxian agrees. He thinks about it a little more and adds, “Maybe it’s better not to summon a ghost with a baby as the bait.”

“I’m not a baby,” Xiaolian says.

“Sure, sure,” Wei Wuxian agrees. He watches Lan Zhan bend over the packages. Wei Wuxian had been so busy cleaning up the last dregs of that disaster that he’d forgotten to be curious about where Lan Zhan had gone this morning.

Xiaolian, for her part, had not forgotten. She watches with great interest as Lan Zhan pulls back the wrapping on the first package. There are four teeny-tiny robes stacked on top of each other and wrapped in white paper, all of them various shades of black or blue. Wei Wuxian grabs the top one and shakes it out, just to see how tiny it is.

Lan Zhan might as well have said *whatever you want, I am with you*, and wrapped that up in paper instead. He loves this man. When he glances over to find Lan Zhan watching him, sees the tiny, self-satisfied smile on his face, he thinks Lan Zhan must be able to see it too.

“Once you have changed into clean robes, we will go,” Lan Zhan tells Xiaolian, like he’s talking to an adult and not a kid who can’t tie her own belt. “I will fix your hair.” He adds the last part with the barest hint of disapproval, and Wei Wuxian feels the need to defend himself.

“I was going to do it, and then the bath exploded!” he says. Lan Zhan shoots an amused look at Wei Wuxian’s own state of dress, his own hair that he’d haphazardly tied back out of his face, and very wisely doesn’t say anything that might be considered rude or hurtful to his very loving and hardworking husband.

Wei Wuxian bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling, trying to look offended, and pokes through the rest of the package. He pulls back the bottom robe, and this time he really can’t hold back from grinning.

“Lan Zhan, did you buy her toys?” Wei Wuxian teases. He has to suppress a laugh when Xiaolian’s head snaps up, and she immediately drops the skirt of the robe she’d been inspecting with wide-eyed interest.

“We will be bringing her with us. She must be entertained, so that she does not disrupt the investigation,” he says, like it’s purely practical. Wei Wuxian beams at him.

“Ah, you’re so soft, of course you bought her toys.” He definitely bought too many, though. Of course, Lan Zhan has no restraint when it comes to spoiling Wei Wuxian, but he finds himself smiling at the assortment, charmed and happy and a little overwhelmed at how easily

Lan Zhan extends that earnest generosity. “A sword and butterfly, too! Were you feeling nostalgic?”

“A rattle drum would be disruptive,” he says, refusing to look embarrassed about it. Wei Wuxian laughs, and then tuts when Xiaolian slinks over to try to sneak a doll out of the pile.

“Change out of your dirty robes, first,” he says, “and why don’t you thank Lan Zhan for the presents?”

“Thank you, Angry Uncle,” she says obediently.

“Aiya, he’s not angry, and he has a name.” Wei Wuxian sighs in exasperation, but then she hands him the light blue robe and sticks her arms out impatiently, and it’s just too cute. “Why don’t you just call him Hanguang Jun, for now?”

“Hanguang Jun,” she parrots, and mostly gets the syllables right. Wei Wuxian ties on the sash of her robe and finishes wrestling on the cutest pair of tiny boots, and almost as soon as he’s done she turns the most expectant, begging look straight on Lan Zhan. At first, it looks like pouting isn’t going to work on him (Wei Wuxian knows for a fact there’s a rule about begging for things, because he loves to tease Lan Zhan about breaking it). Then Lan Zhan’s lips quirk up in the tiniest smile, small enough that Xiaolian is starting to look a little discouraged in her attempt. Wei Wuxian’s heart sings as he lifts her onto the bed for a better look at their spoils.

They leave for their meeting with the magistrate shortly before lunch. Wei Wuxian smiles politely at the innkeeper as they pass by the front desk, and Xiaolian clings to his robes as they follow Lan Zhan outside. Lan Zhan had come down an hour ago to hand her a little extra money for the continued reservation of their rooms, as well as the destruction of their bathtub, and a little extra in case of any lasting water damage. Wei Wuxian had expected her to be testy about the damage, but instead she hadn't quite wanted to meet his eye. He is actually beginning to suspect that Lan Zhan omitted the details on how, exactly, the bathtub had broken, and one of the junior's frantic choking as he too-quickly inhaled his breakfast tea had, possibly, put some strange ideas into her head on the matter. Still, it’s better than the woman throwing them out on their backs for her superstitions, so Wei Wuxian is willing to let her assumptions go uncorrected.

The walk to the magistrate’s office takes them back over the bridge into a very wealthy-looking area of the city. The building is fine, but very plain compared to the residences surrounding it, though some work around the side suggests it may be newly built, and still undergoing renovations.

Jurong City is not a new community, but the leadership surrounding it had been in flux in the past several years, and not just within the cultivation world after the disgrace of the Moling Su sect, and that lack of stability reflects on them down to the unfinished look of the building. The doorman appears startled to see such a large group, moreso when he recognizes

who they are. Lan Zhan sees his uncertainty and produces the magistrate's letter from his robe.

"We have arranged a meeting with the magistrate," he says. The man glances at the letter briefly, now looking thoroughly confused.

"It was at his request," Wei Wuxian adds. The man nods hesitantly and bids them to wait.

Lan Zhan stands very close by his side. Wei Wuxian feels him staring, but when he glances over he sees that he's looking not at Wei Wuxian's very handsome profile, but at Xiaolian. Lan Zhan had told her to choose only a couple toys to take with them from the honestly unwieldy pile of toys that he'd bought for her. She'd immediately gone for the doll and the sword, which she now has clutched in a fiercely possessive grip. Of course, Wei Wuxian had stashed a few extra small toys in his sleeves, in case she grew bored with them, so maybe he was just as bad as Lan Zhan about spoiling her.

Xiaolian's doll, an apparently beautiful and strong cultivator who is also extremely smart, according to the story she had narrated quietly to herself on the walk over, is currently making a perilous trek across Wei Wuxian's shoulder and down his arm. Lan Zhan watches her play with her toy with a subtle, pleased expression, and Wei Wuxian watches his husband with an expression to match.

Less than a minute later, the door to the back hall opens again. The magistrate seems somewhat harried; he stops in the doorway as though stuck, staring. Wei Wuxian has one moment of confusion while he looks at them with absolute bafflement before understanding dawns.

"I'm guessing you didn't know we were coming?" Wei Wuxian asks.

That seems to startle the man back into motion. He bows low to Lan Zhan, partly in apology.

"Hanguang Jun," he says. "Ah… no, I was not expecting you."

"Our summons came from your office," Lan Zhan says. The magistrate cocks his head, then glances behind him a bit absently, as though mentally cataloguing the people in his employ and, by the expression he's doing a very poor job concealing, probably wondering who he needs to throttle.

"I see," he says. "Well. Since you are here, please. Join me." The magistrate glances very briefly at Xiaolian. Whether he recognizes her or not is hard to tell, but he seems more perplexed by her presence than upset, and doesn't seem to take any issue with her coming inside, at least. Though initially caught off guard by their arrival, he masters himself well and gestures them back deeper into the building with a polite smile.

They pass through a wide room, crammed to the brim with desks and shelves upon shelves of papers, books, and boxes. The slapdash assortment of overflowing documents would be enough to make a Lan archivist faint from shock. It's stuffy inside, and not just from the heat. Several officials are seated at their desks, though all but one seem deeply engrossed in their work and do not even spare the procession a glance.

Beyond the desks appears to be a waiting area, empty save for a single woman, dressed simply and cloistered away from the rest. She is hunched over in her chair, and one of the magistrate's officials is hovering, leaning only slightly away from her. There is a strange, conflicted look on the man's face, and when they come around to the room toward them, Wei Wuxian sees that the woman is weeping silently into her sleeve.

The man sees them with the magistrate then, and freezes with such a guilty look that it is clear he knows who they are, and how they came to be here. The magistrate sees it too. His lips press into a thin line for the briefest of moments before that calm exterior is back; he gestures for the man to follow them into his office as well.

The man wrings his hands but bows once to the crying woman and rises very reluctantly to follow them. The woman doesn't spare them more than a glance, and the magistrate doesn't acknowledge her as they pass either, and so the whole group enters into the magistrate's office and shuts the door behind them. Once inside the magistrate settles behind his desk and gestures for them to sit. Lan Zhan does, but Wei Wuxian takes Xiaolian aside instead, to keep her out of the way while they talk.

She spreads her bounty of toys out in the corner. Wei Wuxian offers her a few others to choose from to keep her entertained. The magistrate is clearly curious about her presence, but he is polite enough not to comment. He turns his attention to Lan Zhan again.

"You must forgive me. Had I known you were coming, I would have had tea prepared for your arrival," he says, pointedly. His employee shifts uncomfortably. "But I must confess, I'm not certain what business you have in Jurong City."

"Our summons suggested several murders had gone unsolved in the days prior to our arrival," Lan Zhan says. "We have come to offer our assistance."

"I see," the magistrate says at length. "It is true there have been… deaths. However, we already have a cultivator in our employ who has been investigating the matter. I do not see why you would have been summoned."

At this the magistrate pointedly turns to the official, which then turns all the Lan disciples' attention on him as well, until all the eyes in the room are boring into him. The poor fellow doesn't handle the sudden scrutiny well, and quickly, nervously, relents.

"I only…" he begins, then stops, then begins again, "I only thought, since Shen Mu has lamented how troubling the case is, and now with several days of no progress, and Gusu Lan so close…" He trails off again miserably as the magistrate seems unmoved by his reasoning.

"And so you chose to force the matter by impersonating a magistrate," he says. The man looks ready to collapse in on himself, but while he seems deeply apologetic at having been caught, Wei Wuxian notes with some surprise that he doesn't make any excuses, or even seem to particularly regret the act itself. That's… interesting.

He can only assume, given the circumstances, that the woman outside the office was somehow related to the victims. The timing seems too perfect, otherwise. So this man who was speaking with her is clearly involved in the investigation, and has some reason to believe

that it is not being properly managed. Wei Wuxian keeps that insight to himself, but he can see that Lan Zhan's expression has gone thoughtful as well, watching the exchange between the two men with a keen eye.

"It was not our intention to force your hand," Lan Zhan interjects, as it looks like they are going to devolve into arguing the matter right there.

"You… no, of course not," the magistrate says. More reluctantly, he says, "We would be happy to have your assistance. I suppose I should fill you in on the situation, then."

Wei Wuxian hopes his reluctance isn't out of any ill-intentions, and has much more to do with his pride. He wonders how the magistrate's men will react, to hear that an outside sect has been called in to take over so blatantly due to their lack of progress. Of course, Lan Zhan's reputation is unquestionable, so they can't be too offended, but it will put the magistrate in an awkward position, nonetheless.

The magistrate cuts the other man one final look, full of reproach, and he all but flies out of the room when he dismisses him.

The magistrate begins with a short orientation on the city, it's citizens, its population. Wei Wuxian tries to look attentive, but this is clearly him blustering a little. He's trying to gather his thoughts, trying to demonstrate how little this string of murders ought to reflect on his own management skills. It is the sort of redirecting of blame that Lan Zhan clearly finds distasteful, though he doubts the magistrate notices, and Wei Wuxian knows for a fact that Lan Zhan has little patience for this sort of talking in circles, having dealt with more than enough of it during his time as Chief Cultivator.

Xiaolian plays quietly for a little while, but clearly the conversation is over her head, and the seriousness of the adults in the room quickly bores her. Wei Wuxian can't really blame her. She's much too young to expect her to sit still for long, especially considering she doesn't have a lot of practice. It's very difficult to be polite when you have a toddler doing her best to whisper-shout about killing monsters over your shoulder, and the magistrate's pointed glances are growing less and less patient with each new feat of the cultivator doll she whispers at him.

She definitely doesn't have the Gusu Lan manners, but then, neither does Wei Wuxian.

"We're going to go play outside, I think," he interrupts, just as the magistrate has begun an account of the city's typical crime rates. Lan Zhan nods in understanding.

"Mn. Behave," Lan Zhan says.

"I am!" she says, puffing up a little. Wei Wuxian pats her on the head.

"He's talking to me," he says, laughing. "Do you want to go outside?"

Xiaolian nods furiously, then quickly scoops up her toys. The magistrate looks a little relieved to see them go. It's probably for the best, since they're kind of exhausting their

vocabulary trying to discuss a string of gruesome murders in a child-friendly way, and he doesn't want their presence to limit Lan Zhan's investigation.

Wei Wuxian goes to open the door and finds someone tugging it at the same moment from the other side. He releases the knob and the door flies open with far too much force, and the man on the other side jumps back, startled.

Shen Mu, he guesses, as the man takes in the room full of Gusu Lan cultivators, gaze bouncing among them all. He lingers longest on Lan Zhan before he turns to the magistrate with a questioning look. He's not quite angry, but definitely defensive, glancing around like he's expecting to be challenged in the doorway.

They've stepped into a complicated situation here, though not intentionally, by accepting their unapproved summons.Wei Wuxian has never met the man personally, but there isn't a lot of love lost between them and the Moling Su sect, so it's hard to say how one of its former members will react to them arriving, technically uninvited. It's definitely awkward, and the juniors are all shooting each other surreptitious little glances, standing ramrod straight and tense as springs, though of course, Lan Zhan is as unflappable as ever. Wei Wuxian could probably cut the tension in the room with a knife... and he wants absolutely nothing to do with it. He flashes Lan Zhan an apologetic smile for leaving him to the wolves, scoops Xiaolian up from the floor, and ducks out the newly opened door.

The chastised official is sitting at his desk with his head in his hands. The crying woman has gone. He carries Xiaolian out through the cluttered entryway and into the yard. He considers, briefly, taking her to walk some of her energy out, but he doesn't want to miss Lan Zhan when he finishes speaking with the magistrate. He's incredibly curious what Shen Mu will have to say about the murders, and his lack of progress on the investigation.

Ah, well. There's plenty of room for her to run around out on the grass. The doorman gives him a strange look when he stops short of the street and sets Xiaolian down, but he doesn't chase him off, so Wei Wuxian takes that as permission enough to turn her loose.

She really had been trying to be polite, he thinks, when Xiaolian goes from whisper-shouting to full on crowing about her dolls' exploits, jumping around excitedly. She keeps handing him toys, and then taking them back, like she isn't sure what she wants to do with them all, except hold onto them very tightly. She'd apparently thought a lot more of that backstory through, which she explains to him in extreme detail as she plays, like the stories have been bottling up inside of her ready to burst out. He wonders how many toys she'd had, how many people she'd had to give them to her, and thinks that may not be far from the truth.

Wei Wuxian remembers getting *his* first toy, the first one that had ever been given to him, specifically, as a gift, and how overwhelmingly unexpected that had been. But he'd had new siblings to play with, too, once he was past the nervousness of a new household, so he'd done a lot less telling stories to himself, and a lot more chasing each other around with sticks.

She puzzles over the toys Wei Wuxian brought for a while, before finally passing him the little butterfly toy.

"You're the monster," she informs him gravely. "He's bad so he dies at the end."

“Oh don’t worry, I have a lot of practice with that,” he says lightly, though obviously the joke is lost on her.

She springs up from her seat to begin attacking some underground monster with her sword, and he thinks, well, she has a lot more… enthusiasm than he remembers Sizhui having. He was always a pretty mild mannered kid, though he supposes there was a long stretch of time he’d missed where he may well have gone through his own exhausting developmental phases.

She’s careful with her toys though, holding her doll protectively even while she swings her sword around. They sit in the grass and play for a while, and Wei Wuxian keeps half his attention on the door in case Lan Zhan and the juniors finish early. They’d set down on the first patch of open grass that Wei Wuxian found, just close enough to the main-entrance of the municipal building that he would be able to spot anyone that might come out looking for them.

“She had to fight the monster, but he stole her sword,” Xiaolian says very seriously, and then sticks the sword in his other hand. Is he still the monster? Or maybe he’s supposed to be the mountain now. It’s unclear.

“I know that man,” she says a little nonsensically. At first, he thinks she’s just playing, but then she tugs on his sleeve to get his attention. “Do you know him?”

“The magistrate? I just met him today,” Wei Wuxian says. “How do *you* know him?”

“I talked to him before,” she says.

“About your parents?” he guesses. The magistrate didn’t look like he’d recognized her. He wonders how many orphans Jurong City could possibly have that they’d blur together, but then again, she looks pretty different from yesterday now that she’s in brand new clothes. “Was he nice?” Wei Wuxian asks. It doesn’t really matter, except that it does.

Xiaolian thinks about it, shrugs. Then she goes back to her doll, like it doesn’t really care either way. She starts digging a little hole between their knees, and maybe Wei Wuxian should stop her from ruining their lawn, but as far as he’s concerned, she’s owed a lot more than a free pass at pulling up their perfectly manicured grass.

He’d already had an idea of how many people were overlooking this girl, but the reminder that they had known and chosen to do nothing chafes at him. She hadn’t just slipped through the cracks. They’d looked at her situation and let her fall through the cracks, anyway. His anger with the situation settles cold in his stomach, and then when he exhales, the chill is pricking at his skin, too.

This time, he’s almost expecting her when he turns.

Like a cloud moving over the sun, he feels the chill as the lady brushes past them. At first she only watches. Wei Wuxian turns his head slowly to the side, searching for her, but he doesn’t see the shadow he’d seen earlier, only feels the prickly unease he’s come to recognize with

her presence. It gives him a chance to slide his fingers over Chenqing, easing the dizi from his belt.

Xiaolian is perched between his knees, telling herself, or maybe telling her doll, an almost nonsensical story, and then she gasps, goes still, and Wei Wuxian can tell that she's noticed her, too.

He brushes the thumb of his free hand over her tiny one. She's clutching the doll so tightly that her little fingers are going white, but after a second of soothing his thumb over hers, she lets out another tiny breath and goes back to her story. Wei Wuxian isn't sure if Xiaolian can feel it too, but she leans back into him, just a little.

It feels a bit like they've been draped in silk, the fabric swishing past itself over and over, building static, until—

The shock. An icy hand presses into his shoulder and pushes down, urging him to lean forward, or—or leaning over his shoulder, so she can reach around him. One of the toys on the ground twitches, flips over. Wei Wuxian puts the dizi to his lips, and for a moment they're frozen, a ghostly hand on his shoulder, Xiaolian with her face fixed so fiercely on her doll, through the first notes of a song to gently, so gently—

There are footfalls on the grass behind them. Wei Wuxian turns slightly too quickly, but the moment whisks away before he can stop it. His heart is hammering but the chill lifts so quickly he feels flushed, and when he looks—

It's only Shen Mu. Wei Wuxian checks his expression, but though he seems unhappy, he clearly hadn't seen anything strange.

Wei Wuxian glances around the courtyard, but they're completely alone, the hand is gone, the curious, buzzing feeling is gone. He lets the dizi drop back to his knee and finds that Xiaolian has put her hand there already, trying to lean around him to look.

"Hello," Wei Wuxian says tightly, and wills his startled heart to calm down.

"You've come with Hanguang Jun," Shen Mu says stiffly. He seems a bit irritated by Wei Wuxian's rudeness, but Wei Wuxian can't find it in him at the moment to worry about dropping everything to greet him properly.

Shen Mu looks like he's leading up to something, but then a puzzled expression crosses his face, with just the barest hint of recognition. His eye's flick to Chenqing. The man stops a few feet away, and Wei Wuxian can see the moment he goes from *Hanguang Jun's companion* to *the Yiling Patriarch* in the man's head. He still seems to be in a bad mood, but if he was going to take it out on Wei Wuxian, he's clearly changed his mind.

Wei Wuxian smiles like he hasn't noticed and says, "Can we help you?"

The man glances between the adorable little girl, fiddling with her doll in her lap, and Wei Wuxian, fearsome demonic cultivator that he is. From his face, he doesn't know what to make of them. He clearly recognizes Xiaolian, which, considering the rampant rumors of her

apparent curse status, Wei Wuxian should hope he would. He'd seemed defensive inside, and Wei Wuxian sees it again now as he watches her. He almost looks… vaguely guilty, but Wei Wuxian doesn't know what to make of that.

Wei Wuxian does find it strange that the cultivator who claims to work for the city had not followed up on such a mysterious case. He's sure saying as much will not earn him any love from Shen Mu, but—

"You recognize her?" Wei Wuxian asks. Surprisingly, it's not Shen Mu who answers.

"Mn. I talked to him," Xiaolian says again. Ah, so she'd been talking about Shen Mu earlier, not the magistrate. He meets Shen Mu's gaze.

"I've already looked into the girl," he says defensively. "She's not cursed."

"I agree," Wei Wuxian says, and barely, just *barely* resists adding, *so you confirm she's not cursed, and then you just dusted your hands, huh?*, because he's trying this new thing where he doesn't pick a fight with every person in this stupid city. So far he hasn't been doing a great job, but since Lan Zhan is going to need to know what this man's tried so far, he's not going to antagonize him. Instead he waits patiently while the man eyes them both, before finally the defensive set of his shoulders sags.

"Well," he says at length, through partly gritted teeth. "You can tell Hanguang Jun that I will meet him by the east gate when he is ready to depart."

Ah, so at least he's willing to cooperate with them, despite his stinging pride. That's good. Wei Wuxian agrees, bows politely just to keep the peace, though it's a little awkward around the child in his lap. Shen Mu returns the gesture, but stalks off immediately after, clearly done with the conversation. Wei Wuxian watches him go for a moment, then turns back to puzzle over the abandoned toys, now lying motionless in the grass.

It takes another half an hour before Lan Zhan returns. The juniors trail out after him, looking very eager to escape the awkward atmosphere of the magistrates office, aside from Lan Jie, who mostly looks excited by the drama of it all. The other juniors are far less amused, as they recount the rude interruption by Shen Mu after Wei Wuxian's escape.

"He was so rude to Hanguang Jun," Lan Xue says. "I suppose it's to be expected, as a former member of Molin Su. If it were Senior Wei I would understand, but how shameless of him —"

Lan Zhan cuts him a reproachful look, and Lan Xue only then seems to realize he's running his mouth again. Wei Wuxian pats his husband on the arm.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, don't look so offended, he's right. It takes a much bolder person to be willing to disrespect *you*. You can hardly blame him, though. I'd be defensive too, if Hanguang Jun

came personally to tell me he was taking over my job because I was doing so poorly."

Wei Wuxian taps his chin in thought.

"Not to mention," he says, "he already has the reputation of his previous sect hanging over him, as you've demonstrated," Lan Xue has the decency to look chastised, at least, "but that doesn't mean we should judge him for his previous sect leader's faults."

"Only his own," Lan Zhan agrees, and Wei Wuxian huffs a laugh.

"Well, in any case, it seems he's willing to work with you," Wei Wuxian says, and then relays the message Shen Mu had left with him. "You're investigating the most recent murder, then?"

"Mn," Lan Zhan says. "You mentioned you suspected a fierce corpse. It is best then to start with the city graveyard."

"Are you leaving?" Xiaolian asks, and when Wei Wuxian doesn't answer immediately she yanks on his sleeve insistently. "Are you going *home*?" she asks again, slower. Wei Wuxian brushes a hand over her hair.

"Not yet," he says. "We're still investigating. Are you tired?"

"No," she says immediately. "I don't wanna go home. I'm, hm." She squints at him. It's the expression Jiang Cheng always gave him when he was trying to trick him into something, before he accepted that older brothers were too smart to be tricked. "Are you *hungry*?"

So. Xiaolian is clearly getting hungry. As are the juniors, if their interested looks are anything to go by, although they're trying to be polite about it. It's past lunch time, anyway, so they choose a restaurant to catch Wei Wuxian up on the parts of the conversation he missed. They get two tables, one for the juniors and one for themselves. Lan Xue takes Xiaolian's hand and leads her over to sit with them, so that he and Lan Zhan can discuss without her overhearing. She's a little shy at first, but Lan Xue is friendly and talkative enough for both of them while she warms up to them. Wei Wuxian watches the server flutter around their table, but she doesn't seem to recognize Xiaolian seated among the Lan disciples, wearing clean robes, hair perfectly, carefully arranged, with her toys piled up in her lap. He looks back at Lan Zhan and catches him looking at him with a soft smile, so Wei Wuxian, of course, responds by striking a very handsome pose, teasing which Lan Zhan does not so much as blink in response to, though he thinks, maybe, just slightly, he sees him trying to hide his amusement.

Lan Zhan takes the opportunity before their food arrives to recount the details of the case. According to the magistrate, the two victims are unrelated, both found within the city limits days apart. Prior to that, there had been very little suspicious activity, save for one instance of a fierce corpse sighted outside the city limits over a month ago, which Shen Mu insisted was swiftly dealt with, to no lasting negative effects.

"So, essentially, they have no idea what they're dealing with," Wei Wuxian summarizes further. Lan Zhan's too tactful to put it in such harsh words, but the assessment is fair, and he nods in agreement.

“Shen Mu seems somewhat… thoughtless in his process,” Lan Zhan admits, which is about as close as he will get to calling him a fucking mess. “Though I’m certain part of the blame lies on his operating without the support of a sect. He was defensive.”

Wei Wuxian had noticed. He’s clearly prideful, though perhaps they’re being a bit ingracious in their assessment of him, considering they’ve dropped in unannounced to take his job out from under him. He tries to imagine how he would feel, if Lan Zhan appeared suddenly, all severe and righteous, to solve all of his problems… but that sounds pretty hot, actually, so maybe he’s a bit too biased to answer that question fairly.

“We discussed Xiaolian as well,” Lan Zhan says.

“What did Shen Mu say?” Wei Wuxian asks.

“He claimed that since there was no curse, it was outside his responsibilities,” Lan Zhan says. Wei Wuxian had assumed as much, but it pisses him off to hear he’s admitted to his laziness in investigating so plainly. Sure, it’s pretty obvious she’s not cursed, but that was really only scratching the surface of the strangeness surrounding her, if he’d spared even a moment of time to look.

“No mention of the lady, then?” he asks. Lan Zhan shakes his head, looking deeply displeased. He can see why Lan Zhan finds the man careless. He also doubts Lan Zhan kept his opinion on the matter to himself, considering how pointedly he recounts the exchange now.

He supposes that explains why Shen Mu had come storming out to speak with him earlier, and why he’d looked vaguely guilty at the sight of Xiaolian. If Lan Zhan had dressed him down about ignoring such a clearly suspicious case, he’s certain the man is second guessing himself now, or at least trying to figure out what Hanguag Jun had seen in the girl that he had missed.

“I asked the magistrate about Xiaolian as well,” he said, a little more quietly, a little more thoughtful. He hesitates for a moment as he mulls the conversation over. “He confirmed that she has no surviving relatives.”

This he adds with the clear, unspoken question hanging between them. Wei Wuxian casts his gaze over to the other table, where Xiaolian is carefully explaining the exploits of her doll to an audience of curious and amused juniors. Every so often Lan Xue asks her a prompting question, which she answers eagerly, and without any trace of the suspicion she’d given Wei Wuxian on their first meeting.

“Lan Zhan, she has nowhere else to go,” Wei Wuxian says quietly, so that she won’t overhear. He looks back at Lan Zhan, expecting him to look thoughtful, but instead he only looks unbearably fond. Of course, he’d known what Wei Wuxian wanted to do here, even before he’d admitted it to himself.

“She may… struggle with the rules,” Lan Zhan says, matter-of-fact, but he’s still smiling, just a little.

“Well, *I* struggle with the rules, and they haven’t thrown me out yet,” Wei Wuxian says. He pictures the look on Lan Qiren’s face, imagining Xiaolian running around, speaking with her mouth full, talking back to her elders with that same leery suspicion of adults that she’d shown Wei Wuxian.

It’s… a surprisingly appealing picture.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they've finished eating, Lan Zhan and the juniors leave to find Shen Mu, and as much as Wei Wuxian is really tempted to go with them, he doesn't think it's a good idea for him to bring Xiaolian. She'd gotten bored of the magistrate's office fairly quickly. The juniors are here to learn, not to babysit, and most of the adults who could watch her still think she's cursed, and would probably rather take their chances with the fierce corpses. The thought of leaving her in their room, where the innkeeper could toss her out onto the street as she liked, is out of the question.

Besides, Wei Wuxian has his own plans for the day.

He'd seen the lady several times now—by the market, in the inn, and by the magistrate's office—all in different places, at different times. He wants to know if anyone else has ever seen her, or if she really only appears to Xiaolian, before he starts making any conclusions on what she might want. He prods Xiaolian for a list of places she'd seen the lady before as they walk. Xiaolian, unfortunately, is a baby. So, maybe not the best at giving directions.

Wei Wuxian isn't sure what the connection is between Xiaolian and the lady yet, but he wants to get a clearer picture of what he's dealing with. So far the only thing he knows for certain, the one common factor which makes itself very clear, is that the citizens of Jurong City will apparently blame Xiaolian for anything.

"I see her here. And I dropped my shoe," she says, pointing at the corner that turns off the main road into a residential district. She points again at a spot in the road, where a pothole has been filled in with sand. "And then the ground broke, and I got yelled at."

"And the lady come, and there was a dog," she says, as they walk through a prettily landscaped park. Very gravely, after Wei Wuxian's own heart, she adds, "I don't like the dog. And then I get yelled at."

"And there is a cart and it goes really fast," she tells him, as they cross the main street to head back toward the bridge. "And the lady breaks the wheel. And then—"

"You got yelled at?" Wei Wuxian guesses with a sigh.

Wei Wuxian is pretty sure that she's been blamed for every single thing that's ever gone wrong in Jurong City, by the time they finish walking from one neighborhood to the next over.

At least they're being given a wide berth today. They're still getting looks, sure, but none of the hostility they'd dealt with yesterday. When Wei Wuxian pauses to purchase a handful of lychee to snack on while they walk back to the inn, the stall owner barely blinks at her, even as she shuffles him through the interaction so quickly that she almost forgets to take his

money. He's not sure what to make of that, exactly. Maybe it's because Wei Wuxian is here to defend her, and no one wants to pick a fight with him. Maybe word has gotten around that Hanguang Jun has taken an interest in her—certainly his reputation outweighs any prejudices they might be able to manage against a toddler.

Or maybe it's just that she's all cleaned up. (It is, apparently, harder for them to justify treating her poorly when she looks like any other little girl. He can see the guilt on their faces, and refuses to avert his eyes).

He doesn't know, but he's not complaining. Xiaolian doesn't even seem to notice, happy to tug him along by the sleeve.

Xiaolian shows him the moss-less patch of railing that had been cleanly broken, even though it is solid stone. She's very lucky that the break had toppled her onto solid ground, and not spilled her into the river behind them, because apparently she doesn't know how to swim. Wei Wuxian is just filing that information away for later when he spots a woman up ahead of them, leaning against the railing of the bridge and staring searchingly down into the water rushing below her. She seems vaguely familiar, and he looks more closely to attempt to place her.

It's the woman he'd seen outside the magistrate's office, he realizes. She's no longer crying, but he can see the dark circles under her eyes, the puffy redness in her cheeks that betray her. She doesn't notice them approaching. Wei Wuxian taps her lightly on the shoulder, and she startles so badly that he has to catch her elbow to steady her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Wei Wuxian says. "I just wanted to ask you a few questions. I'm not sure if you recognize me."

She looks at him blankly for a moment, but then her shoulders come up, and the tension from the magistrate's office is back. "You're one of those cultivators," she says. She doesn't seem particularly happy to see him, but Wei Wuxian can't really blame her.

"That's right. We're here investigating, on request of…" Well, not the magistrate, clearly, he'd been far from pleased to see them, "...the magistrate's office." She nods, so Wei Wuxian continues: "I'm very sorry to ask, but I wonder if you know about these... incidents we're investigating."

"My sister," she says, with blunt resignation. "My sister was the second woman they found."

"I'm sorry," Wei Wuxian says. He'd figured as much, but to hear her say it with such weary resignation tugs at the pit of his stomach anyway. Before he can stop her, Xiaolian reaches out and pats her hand, gently. The woman looks down, startled, as though she'd only just realized that Wei Wuxian wasn't alone.

"Who's this?" she asks, the barest hint of a smile tugging her lips. A bath and new clothes seems to be enough to disguise her, or maybe this woman just isn't familiar with the rest of the city's deep superstitions. Emboldened by the woman's smile, Xiaolian puffs up her chest a little.

“We’re partners!” she says. The woman glances at Wei Wuxian, who nods with theatrical gravity at her declaration. It’s enough to make the tension in her shoulders go out again. She seems to rally, and when she turns her attention back to Wei Wuxian, she’s more open.

“You had questions for me?” she asks.

“Can you start by telling me what happened?” he asks. They’ve heard the magistrate’s account already, but it’s good to hear it in her words.

“My sister didn’t come home. This was… four nights ago now. And they…” She glances down at Xiaolian, who’s watching her with wide-eyed interest. “She was in the alley,” she says.

“In the city?” Wei Wuxian asks.

“Near the east gate, but yes, in the city,” she says. Wei Wuxian hums thoughtfully. It’s strange that there were no witnesses, if she was found within the city walls. He thinks of the fog that had rolled in that first night, of the strange calm that had rolled over the streets, and how even Lan Zhan had not seen the corpse that had come close enough for Wei Wuxian to smell it’s rotting flesh mere moments before his arrival.

“Do you know what happened?” Wei Wuxian asks. This may be a bit much for her, but he needs to know. The woman pauses, but shakes her head.

“That cultivator wasn’t very helpful,” she says. “Once I’d… identified my sister, he left rather quickly.”

“And what did the magistrate say?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him,” she says.

That surprises him. He tilts his head and asks, “You didn’t speak to him today?”

“No, I was… inquiring about a payment plan,” she says, her voice getting slightly quieter as she trails off. She looks somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but Wei Wuxian is only confused.

“Payment for what?” he asks.

“For the burial,” she says, now taking her turn to look confused.

“You need a payment plan for that?” he asks. He’s not judging. He can understand the urge, can understand why one might want something extravagant for a loved one, but still, to spend so much that a payment plan was necessary seemed unwise.

“Ah, young master, you misunderstand. That’s just how things are done here,” she says. “The magistrate’s office handles all burials. The cultivator he hired… it’s to prevent these sorts of things from happening, to keep things well regulated. The administrative fees are… quite steep. It is illegal, here, to bury your own dead.”

A creeping dread settles into the pit of Wei Wuxian's stomach. Xiaolian senses his unease, reached up to clutch the bottom of his robe nervously, with her other hand hugging the handle of her wooden sword to her chest.

"And if you can't afford it? These administrative fees?" Wei Wuxian asks.

"There are payment plans," she says nervously, but Wei Wuxian stops her with a hand on her wrist.

"And what are you to do, if you simply *can't* afford it?" he asks seriously. She looks at him for a moment, her indecision poised dangerously on a sharp edge, and then she casts her eyes away.

In the smallest voice, she begins: "Young master, of course I would never consider it," she says, quickly, like she can hardly catch her breath on the words. "Because it is illegal, and I don't want any trouble. But… I have heard that those who know they cannot afford a proper burial will carry one out in secret, with the hope that they will not… realize the person has died, and come looking for the body."

Wei Wuxian feels sick. He can see, even, how the offer seems so honest and sensible, to have a trained cultivator overseeing the burial of the dead. Of course, for a city this size, resentful energy unchecked can wreak havoc, of course a fearful community would agree to such a sensible thought, and perhaps even think themselves better off for it. Of course, the people who would be harmed by something as ridiculous as charging huge fees simply for the right to be buried are the same people who would struggle to stand up against the policy.

If people are hiding their dead, burying them in secret in the hopes that they will not be found out, that their graves will not be discovered, Wei Wuxian can only imagine the consequences. Surely they'll try to honor them, but how many of these unmarked graves go neglected and forgotten, while their loved ones cower in fear of being discovered, fined, maybe arrested—

"In any case, it's not an option for me," she says. "They know my sister is dead. They would notice, if she was buried without their oversight."

"Have you paid for her burial yet?" Wei Wuxian asks. She shakes her head. "Don't. Not until we're finished with our investigation."

Wei Wuxian turns and leads Xiaolian away by the hand. The woman watches him go, frozen at the bridge rail. She's still there when he glances back as they round the bend toward the city gates.

"Where are we going?" Xiaolian asks. Her short legs can hardly keep up with him, so he scoops her into his arms. She lets him without protest, smart enough to realize the gravity of their conversation, even if she can't possibly understand the implications behind the woman's words.

"We need to find Lan Zhan," he says.

He has only a vague idea of where the graveyard is, but he knows that Lan Zhan was planning to meet Shen Mu at the east gate, so he starts there. The road is empty. They'd been walking around the city for the better part of the afternoon, so he's not surprised to see that there are very few people near the city outskirts. He doubts they would want to be out here after dark, with the rumors about the recent murders flying.

Wei Wuxian follows a trade road from the city gates with Xiaolian on his hip. She doesn't complain as he carries her, tired out from all the walking, but she watches the scenery with keen interest. It might be her first time out of the city, or at least the first she remembers.

When he sees the marker for the graveyard up ahead on the path, he quickens his steps. The fog rolls over him so quickly that Wei Wuxian hardly notices it coming. He stops in his tracks, the quiet crunch of his boots on the gravel muffled, the birdsong in the trees now silent.

"Uh oh," Xiaolian says, and it's so out of place in the sudden quiet that it startles him into a laugh. She pats his sleeve. "I don't look?"

"I'll warn you," he promises. "We're gonna be fine, though. You're safe with me, you know that?"
He waits for her to nod, and then shifts her more securely on his side, so that she can wrap her arms around his neck, so that she won't fall if he suddenly needs his hands. He stands for a moment straining to listen, waiting for something else to emerge, but the path is still and unmarred by shadows in the pure white fog.

It feels wrong though, how quickly the weather turned. He takes a few, tentative steps back, beyond the perimeter of the graveyard.

The fog recedes again.

Well, that's definitely not natural.

He steps cautiously forward again and lets the fog roll in around them. It's limited to the area, but still reacting to his presence somehow. They move up the road cautiously, with Wei Wuxian stretching his senses as well as he can through the muffling fog, and Xiaolian clinging tightly to his robe.

So dampened by the fog, he almost misses the little curious tug of spiritual energy at the back of the stone marker at the edge of the graveyard. If he'd walked only a few steps to the left side of the path, if he hadn't already been suspicious of the unnatural fog, he would have missed it. He follows the source, squints through the fog at the blurry shape of what appears to be a small talisman affixed behind the base of the stone.

Wei Wuxian rips the talisman down, and the fog recedes just a little, pulling tighter to the graveyard. It's some kind of array, anchored at the borders with these talismans. He studies the writing on the talisman. The spell itself seems familiar, a sort of modified maze array, but it's not a perfect replica, where a few added strokes have changed the meaning slightly.

“Lan Zhan?” he calls. There’s no response.

He’s not sure how large the graveyard is, but for a place of Jurong City’s size, it must stretch quite a ways to account for the demand for space, even if the plots are shared. There must be a system for burials, ranging from newer to older plots, but Wei Wuxian hadn’t thought to ask.

Unease prickles at the back of his neck, but he can’t tell whether there’s really something watching him, or if he just doesn’t like how dampened everything feels in this fog. He can’t sense anything resentful in the immediate area, at least, but it’s not very reassuring, with how close he’d needed to get to stumble across this talisman.

How’s he supposed to find anything in this fog? He’s going to have to search the whole thing bit by bit, unless Lan Zhan or the corpses they’re looking for are polite enough to come find him. Although, actually… Lan Zhan *had* heard his dizi, before.

Wei Wuxian pulls Chenqing from his belt, tips it against his lips, and tries not to smile at how Xiaolian’s knees poke into him as she tilts her head back to watch him play. He doesn’t put any spiritual power into the first note, just playing a few bars of their song, just to see if he gets an answer. The crushing, muffled blanket of the fog doesn’t lift, though, and no one calls back to him.

“All right,” Wei Wuxian says, to Xiaolian, and to himself. “Let’s see what we find.”

He’d shifted into playing spiritual music ten minutes ago. He’d found a few more talismans to rip down, but still no sign of Lan Zhan. Even though he’s actively searching—not even for the corpses, just for *any* hint that they’re not wandering blind around an abandoned graveyard—he still almost walks right past them.

He hears a girl’s voice say, *shut up for a second, idiot. Did you hear that?* and then a few long seconds of nothing before, *you are not funny. Quit trying to scare—*

Wei Wuxian slaps a hand over Lan Xue’s mouth before he can shout *too* loudly in surprise, muffling the immediate *Senior Wei, it’s you, thank god* behind his palm. Lan Jie looks just as startled, clearly not expecting anyone to be able to sneak up so closely without their noticing, but she, at least, is too stubborn to scream.

“Did you—” Lan Jie blurts out. “Did you bring the *baby*?”

“I’m *not* a—”

“What, and leave my partner behind?” Wei Wuxian says. “Where’s Lan Zhan?” he asks. Lan Jie and Lan Xue glance at each other. Neither knows.

“We were separated in the fog,” Lan Jie says. “It came out of nowhere while we were surveying the burial sites.”

Wei Wuxian hums. “Not until you reached the graves?” he asks. She shakes her head.

Interesting, Wei Wuxian thinks. He’d thought at first that the flags were limiting the maze array to one location, but if it hadn’t triggered until they’d arrived, then something else was triggering the fog.

“Uh oh,” Xiaolian says again.

Wei Wuxian whirls on his heel, turning to follow Xiaolian’s gaze. It takes him only a moment to spot them, three shadows looming ahead in the fog. Next to him, the juniors go very quiet.

Uh oh pretty much sums it up. Xiaolian actually tries to draw her little wooden sword, which would be *hilarious*, but nope, not happening. He snatches her hand instead and draws the children back the way they’ve come. An uneasy feeling settles in his gut.

They don’t attack. It’s odd. Wei Wuxian has never known a fierce corpse that wasn’t Wen Ning to be tactical, or patient, but these ones don’t just stumble forward blindly like he would expect. They seem, almost, like they don’t notice they’re here, or maybe like something is holding them back...

“Senior Wei?” Lan Jie whispers, uncertain. “Why aren’t they attacking us?”

“I’m… not sure,” Wei Wuxian says.

“Maybe they don’t see us,” Lan Xue suggests.

Wei Wuxian pulls the bunched up talismans out of his pocket, considers them for a moment.

“I think the fog is hiding them,” he says. He holds the talismans out, so they can both get a good look. “Or hiding us. First, we’re going to take care of those corpses, and then I need you two to find the rest of these and destroy them.”

They both nod, and then stare at him expectantly, until—

“What, you want me to do it for you? I’m holding a baby. Who’s the student here?” he asks, and then nods to Xiaolian. “If you can’t handle a couple corpses, by all means, you can hold her and I’ll—”

The juniors startle out of their hiding spot before he can finish the threat. It ruins their surprise attack, a little, but they’re Lans. And they have the best teacher in the world. Wei Wuxian watches as they take care of the corpses without so much as a splash of blood on their white robes. They didn’t really need the advantage. He presses one crumpled talisman into each of their hands as an example of what to look for and sends them off into the fog together.

In the end, it’s Lan Zhan who finds him.

They're walking through the muffled quiet, Xiaolian's face pressed tight against his shoulder. He hasn't told her to close her eyes, but she's still clutching him very tightly. He's already regretting bringing her here, regretting not handing her off to Lan Xue when he had the chance, sending them both out of the fog and back to the city, when the faint mildew scent of rotting moss and grave dirt suddenly becomes far less faint, and far less pleasant.

He has a moment, when the corpse looms up out of the fog, when he flinches away from milky eyes that are far too close, to turn his body away, at least, and spare Xiaolian. He plunges his hand into his sleeve, fingers already grasping for a talisman, and he braces himself for the pain, because he's too close, so that it doesn't blind him—

Metal sings through the air beside his shoulder, and it's good that Xiaolian has decided not to look. Something wet thuds against the ground, and rolls into his ankle. Wei Wuxian steps over it, before Xiaolian can get curious enough to steal a peek.

"Wei Ying, are you all right?" Lan Zhan asks. His hand is not gentle, when he cups Wei Wuxian's shoulder. He leans into it, reassuring.

If he squints into the fog, he can just make out the rough shapes of the other juniors. They dart in and out of view, but it's like watching shadows cast through rice paper, almost disturbing in the lack of sound or any sense they're there.

That is, until a form stumbles gracelessly nearer. Then, Wei Wuxian can make out just the form of Shen Mu, who looks like he's been haggardly chasing after Lan Zhan, and scowls when he sees them together.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he says, ignoring the man. "I came looking for you. This place should be crawling with corpses—"

"No one needed you to tell us that," Shen Mu says. "What business do you have, bringing a child with you?" Wei Wuxian bristles, not least of all because he thinks he knows what's happening here, and Shen Mu is in no position to criticize him. Lan Zhan bristles, too, but just because he's loyal like that.

"Bold of you to say," Wei Wuxian says, and throws the crumpled wad of talismans at his feet. If he'd only been suspicious before, the look on the man's face all but confirms it. "Even the juniors could handle a few fierce corpses, if you hadn't gone and complicated everything."

Lan Zhan glances down at the talismans, up at Wei Wuxian's fierce expression.

"I will take Xiaolian, if you need to use Chenqing," he offers immediately, no explanation necessary. Xiaolian peeks over at him at her name, but she's still got a vice grip on Wei Wuxian's robes. It doesn't matter, because—

"I can't do anything about the fog from here," he says. Wei Wuxian pulls Chenqing from his belt, and then settles onto the ground, with Xiaolian in his lap. Lan Zhan immediately steps up beside him, Bichen drawn. "I've already sent Lan Xue and Lan Jie to clear the fog. We just need to hold them until then."

When he plays, it's a muted shadow of his usual power. He can barely feel through the thick fog that hides them, that hides the corpses *from* them, and every note is like trying to cut through silk with a dull knife.

Lan Zhan dances around him, sliding in and out of view. There are more corpses than Wei Wuxian expected, and he wonders bitterly how long this has been going on. Shen Mu has melted back into the fog, but that's for the best anyway, because Wei Wuxian can hardly be distracted by him. Anger and frustration are useful fuel, but not for this.

One moment, they're fighting in dense, dampening fog, and then next a rush of wind sweeps the graveyard clear. Well tended stones poke out of the ground, the grass chirps with disturbed crickets, and all at once the rush of rot wafts over them, no longer blocked by anything. Lan Jie and Lan Xue must have found the rest of the talismans.

"Eyes closed," Wei Wuxian says quietly.

It's good, and it's not. The fog clears and suddenly the corpses they were fighting one-on-one all swing their gazes around to stare at them. The juniors tense, and Lan Zhan rests his hand back on the strings of his guqin, as suddenly there's nothing keeping the corpses from attacking.

But on the other hand…

Wei Wuxian lifts Chenqing to his lips, and there's nothing dampening the call when he plays. He can feel the seductive urge to grab and twist and control, to really tap into that resentful energy. It's an old craving, a weakness he's shaken a hundred times, and that he'll have to shake a hundred more.

Instead, he only reaches out with a light touch, just enough to hold the corpses still, security not control, and then lets he the junior's swords do the work.

Shen Mu flicks his sleeves out, looking very satisfied with himself, even though he just tied with the fourteen year old for the number of corpses he'd handled during the fight. He must see something in Wei Wuxian's expression, because he suddenly looks much less satisfied.

"What?" he asks, back to being defensive. Wei Wuxian kind of doesn't even want to look at him, so he turns to Lan Zhan instead. Lan Zhan, who puts a hand on his shoulder, smoothing the fabric where it's gotten bunched up, clearly searching for injuries even though Wei Wuxian didn't even enter the fight. He feels his annoyance uncurl, just a little.

"They've been charging people for the right to bury their dead," Wei Wuxian says.

The resentment, having gone unchecked, had festered as the bodies rotted in their unmarked graves. The arrays might have worked to obscure the truth of what Shen Mu's burial policy

had done, but they were not powerful enough to keep the corpses from finding the city, breaking past their weakened wards and roaming the streets in a shroud of unnatural fog.

“It prevents improper—” Shen Mu tries to say, but Wei Wuxian doesn’t want to hear it.

“It *lines your pockets*,” he interrupts. “Don’t pretend it’s for any other reason. I’m guessing you’ve known about the fierce corpses for some time.”

“I...yes,” he said. He hurried to continue, “I had noticed that an abnormal number had been reported. Of course, I tried to find the source. But this is hardly *my fault*.”

“You didn’t just know about them. You’ve actively tried to hide their presence,” Wei Wuxian said.

“I’ve—no! It’s not like that,” he says desperately. “And that aside—there would be no corpses if only—”

“You cannot blame them, when it was their loved ones dying, and your boot on their necks,” Wei Wuxian snaps. He’s startled by his own anger, but when he glances quickly at Xiaolian, she doesn’t seem bothered by his outburst at all. He tamps down his rage, anyway, and continues, “It’s not their job to prevent fierce corpses. It’s yours.”

Shen Mu looks decidedly uncomfortable, and not nearly ashamed enough.

“I realized the source of the corpses recently,” he says. “And I was handling it. But I thought —there were so many, and to go about hunting down every unmarked grave to lay them to rest properly was hardly efficient.”

“Efficient,” Lan Zhan says. Wei Wuxian can see the disgust on his face, but to Shen Mu, his expression only makes him nod warily.

“I thought, perhaps, there was another way…” he says.

He’s been experimenting with these arrays around the city, the graveyard, in an attempt to keep the fierce corpses out of Jurong City. It hadn’t been a terrible idea, only sloppily done, which might offend him even more. Wei Wuxian can tell what the intention had been—to hide the city from the corpses, and bar their entry to protect their citizens from any attack. Wei Wuxian is certain the talismans were meant to keep the city out of the corpse’s view, even as their numbers grew, and with it their resentment.

Nevermind the travellers outside the city, or the people too poor to live within its walls. Nevermind that the talismans themselves had been flawed, only hiding the corpses but barring nothing, making them even more lost and erratic in their undead wanderings.

Shen Mu must have realized what this new policy was doing. Things could have ended there, if he had reached out to any of the major sects for support. But for him to admit that their policy had done *the exact opposite* of what they’d claimed it would was too much, either out of greed or his pride. It’s this cowardice that Wei Wuxian can’t stand.

“You’ll answer to the magistrate,” Lan Zhan says, “for the two women who died due to your negligence. For your negligence as a cultivator, you will answer to Gusu Lan.”

They return to the magistrate’s office.

The magistrate is his own problem. It’s not illegal to charge municipal fees. It’s not illegal to be bad at your job, either, and Wei Wuxian thinks this is probably the case more than anything, that the magistrate was too new and uncertain in his position to see that what this cultivator-for-hire was doing under his nose was wrong. It’s not illegal, but Wei Wuxian still can’t bring himself to like the man, much.

They set the juniors to interviewing the citizens, searching for people who may know of more unmarked graves in need of tending. It’ll be quite an undertaking, searching a city this size, and will certainly require sending several cultivators dedicated to the task from Gusu, but the juniors can get a start on it at the very least. The first hurdle is getting the people to trust that there will be no punishment for revealing their hidden burials. Wei Wuxian feels it’s a good fit, considering the juniors are far from threatening figures. He’s sure they’ll do better than the magistrate’s office could at getting the word out that the punishments for illegal burials have been revoked.

Finally, when they’ve finished explaining what they’ve found and set the juniors to their tasks, he turns to the magistrate.

“There’s one more thing,” Wei Wuxian says.

The magistrate takes several minutes to search for Wei Wuxian’s request, but finally he directs them to the north of the city. He and Lan Zhan take Xiaolian, leaving the juniors to their task as the afternoon fades.

The burnt out shell of the house still stands, but only barely. Xiaolian looks curious, but if she recognizes her first home, or any traces of her grandmother that may remain, it doesn’t show on her face. They tread over the crumbled outlines of where the walls had once stood. The ground is flush with weeds, born from the ashy soil, sprouting from cracks in the blackened remains of the rafters where they lay half-buried like teeth among the crumbling detritus on the floor. They walk the perimeter and feel nothing, no darkness or resentful energy, only a queer and desperate stillness.

A spirit comes when Lan Zhan plays Inquiry. It is Xiaolian’s grandmother, and she seems to recognize her. Wei Wuxian can tell from the merry way she plucks the strings. Xiaolian is fascinated by the way the guqin plays on its own, even more so when Lan Zhan tells her that the music is its own language. Wei Wuxian has gotten better at understanding over the years,

though he is still far from an expert like Lan Zhan. He no longer needs Lan Zhan to translate for him, at least, so he listens patiently as he plays.

Where is your daughter, Lan Zhan asks, and Xiaolian's grandmother is quiet for a long time as the words settle before there is finally, finally, a soft and tentative reply.

Lan Zhan thanks her, and bids her to rest.

They follow her directions, out to the forest, leaving the blackened remains of the home behind them. The route is winding and dense. It is a good place to go, to not be found. Lan Zhan stoops to pick Xiaolian up when the path gets too tricky for her to walk on her own. Wei Wuxian imagines this route would be difficult for an old woman, especially with a baby in tow.

When they find the clearing her grandmother had described, the lady is already waiting for them. They see her more clearly now for what she is, a young woman dressed in practical robes, her hair loose around her face. She watches them warily as they approach.

"Explain it to me," Wei Wuxian says. He has his own suspicions, but he wants to hear it from her. Xiaolian deserves this. She will want to know when she's older, if he can give it to her—the whole story of how things came to be.

She closes her eyes as though pained, and Wei Wuxian closes his eyes with her.

There is a pit in the ground. It may be too shallow, but digging is difficult work for anyone, let alone a frail old woman, a woman who is burdened with a much heavier weight than the earth that she turns. She has counted the money in her purse a hundred times, but she knows it's not enough. She is a woman who had thought her years of mothering were long behind her, who rocks a squalling baby as she cries. She stacks stones over the too shallow grave to brace it against the weather and prays.

When someone asks after her daughter three weeks later, she lies, and tells them she's run off, and the words are like ash on her tongue.

There is a blizzard rolling in, and a spirit waiting in the darkness. The storm has been building all evening, and the winds are so cold and so fierce that they cut through the trees, the stones, the ground. There is but a memory of a child in her arms. She is a warm, small thing, and the spirit grasps against the wind as though to catch the ghost of her.

The ground is so slick with ice that the walk from the house to the gravesite is treacherous, and several weeks have passed since her mother has come to visit. The cutting wind chills

something deeper than flesh, and before she can think better of it, she finds herself drifting down that narrow path towards home.

The fire in the hearth has burnt to guttering coals, the barest glow beneath a pile of charcoal and ash. It's so cold. She touches her mother's cheek and feels the icy stillness of it. She touches her daughter's and feels its warmth, nestled beneath the blankets in her crib.

The kindling by the hearth glides through her fingers like water. She clutches at them desperately, with a single minded determination. Her thoughts are cloudy, distant things, so she knows she must do this, but from one moment to the next she forgets why, remembers, forgets. Her frustration flares and the ashes in the hearth scatter, the smouldering coals go flying. She watches them catch against the wooden floor, the drapes, the blanket of the crib, and she understands that this is wrong, but her thoughts are slippery, and all she knows to do is wrap her arms around her child and hold on, hold on.

Xiaolian didn't know her, of course she couldn't recognize her, this woman who had died as she was born, this lady following her and watching her, this mother who fed her and bathed her and peeled oranges for her, who doesn't know her own strength, and sometimes forgets herself, but never, never forgets her child.

"I understand," Wei Wuxian says, because he can feel how desperately she needs him to understand her. "Of course, I understand."

What mother wouldn't want to look after her child? How could she not, with the way she was treated? She didn't mean to hurt anyone, least of all her own daughter. She'd only done what she could.

Xiaolian watches quietly as her mother's spirit approaches, her cheek pressed against Lan Zhan's shoulder. Her mother reaches out so tentatively, like she fears desperately what might happen if they touch. Lan Zhan nods, and she brushes the back of her knuckles over Xiaolian's cheek with such a gentle tenderness that Xiaolian blinks back tears. Wei Wuxian isn't sure she understands who she is, but she's not afraid of her even as her spirit begins to lose its shape.

"We will keep her safe," Lan Zhan tells the spirit. She nods, her mouth a thin line, the barest quiver shaking her frame.

Wei Wuxian knows that there is no easy way to say goodbye, nothing more painful than the thought of leaving your child alone. She looks at him like she understands him, like she feels the thought as deeply in her chest as he does. She closes her eyes and goes in stages, like the fingers of a clenched fist uncurling, letting go. Xiaolian watches her go and then looks to Wei Wuxian, to Lan Zhan, her lip quivering like she's waiting to see how they'll react.

Lan Zhan sets her down on her own two feet then. He crouches down, so they're closer to eye level. His expression is gentle, and she fidgets nervously as she waits to hear what he wants

to say.

“Xiaolian,” Lan Zhan says. “Would you like to come live with us?”

“At your house?” she asks. She seems surprised, but that suspicious wariness has faded some. She glances tentatively between him and Wei Wuxian. He goes to crouch beside them too, reaches out to offer her his hand. She holds it without hesitation, her tiny fingers curling around his own.

“Mn,” Lan Zhan says. “In Cloud Recesses.”

She’s thoughtful for a moment. “Is the lady coming?” she asks.

“No,” Wei Wuxian says. He’s not sure she’d really understand if he tried to explain to her. She’s too young, maybe. Someday when she’s older, they’ll tell her everything, who the lady was to her, and what her mother had been trying to do. “The lady had to go. She just wanted to make sure you would be all right, first.”

“She’s not coming back,” she says. She sounds a little hopeful, and a little sad.

“No,” Wei Wuxian agrees. “It’s time for her to rest.”

Xiaolian, for her part, doesn’t seem particularly nervous of the change, even if the city was all she’d ever really known. Still, Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan had taken the previous evening to prepare her for what to expect. Lan Zhan, in his infinite patience, had answered every one of her ceaseless questions about Cloud Recessess in great and excruciating detail. Wei Wuxian mostly listened and made sure Lan Zhan didn't leave out the important parts.

Wei Wuxian is positive that he’d mentioned that the rest of the juniors all live in Cloud Recesses, too, and know very well already what it’s like there, but that isn’t stopping Xiaolian from giving them an extremely detailed description of her soon-to-be home.

“And there’s water, so I can swim, but it’s cold,” Xiaolian tells her captive audience of Lan disciples. Now that they’re packing to leave, her energy has ratcheted up into babbling excitement. “And I’m not allowed to run, and I’m not allowed to yell,” she says, with a certain air of dubious concern, like she’s not quite sure how they plan to stop her.

The juniors nod and hum at all the right moments, like she is relaying new and thrilling information to them. “There’s bunnies. They’re soft, and gentle. I’ve never pet a bunny, but I ate one, and it was good,” she says, which makes Lan Jie choke on a laugh. Xiaolian grins and takes this as encouragement to begin explaining the details of the Lan diet, which is very clearly biased by Wei Wuxian’s influence. After a moment inspiration seems to strike her, and she glances around to see if the adults are listening.

“And I get a *real sword*, like Hanguang Jun,” she says seriously, with a carefully innocent expression on her face.

“Oh? Do you?” Lan Xue asks.

She hesitates, and then quickly insists, “Well, I do when I’m big, maybe. That’s true,” and then continues like she hasn’t only just remembered there’s a rule against lying, too.

It’s a little late for breakfast by the time they’re all packed and ready, but they have a long day ahead of them, and Xiaolian isn’t the only one who gets cranky when she’s hungry, so once the juniors have gathered in the hall, Lan Zhan orders them all downstairs to eat.

“I like dumplings,” Xiaolian says, as she is ushered toward the stairs. “With meat! If *you* don’t like meat, I will eat it.”

Wei Wuxian grabs Lan Zhan before he can take a single step out the door, fingers twisted in the shoulder of his robe, and drags him back over. He peeks out the door just long enough to catch sight of the last junior disappearing down the stairs with Xiaolian’s little hand wrapped around theirs, and then he slams the door shut with his free hand.

“So, we could get breakfast,” Wei Wuxian says. He lets go of Lan Zhan’s robes, slides his hand up to curl around the back of his neck. “Or—”

Lan Zhan’s fingers dig into his thighs, and Wei Wuxian huffs a breathless laugh into his neck when his feet leave the floor entirely. Lan Zhan carries him over to the bed like it’s effortless, like the weight of Wei Wuxian’s lips against his pulse is a hundred times heavier than the body in his arms.

It’s been over a week. He should throw him onto the bed, tear his clothes off, but he just crawls onto the mattress without ever letting go, like he’s something precious and worth holding on to.

“We’ve probably got, like, fifteen minutes, before someone wonders where we are,” Wei Wuxian says. When he tilts his head up to kiss him, it is gentle and much, much too slow. “So, you know,” he adds, and helpfully arranges Lan Zhan’s hands on his robes. “Gotta hurry.”

“Hm,” Lan Zhan says, a thoughtful hand on Wei Wuxian’s belt. Then he yanks the whole thing out in one pull, tossing the fabric behind him. “Thirty minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan deserve to have a million children. This is a fact.

(In our heart of hearts, this loud child grows up to be a loud adult, and Jiang Cheng is immediately smitten, and she makes an excellent candidate for Jiang sect heir, but that is a story for another time).

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